



The Thirty Six Stratagems

An Interpretation of the Chinese Classical essay that illustrates a series of stratagems used in politics and in war, as well as in civilian life, often through unorthodox means.

by Mohammed Abbasi

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the **Thirty-Six Stratagems**

The 36 Stratagems are a set of strategies that can be applied in various situations to gain an advantage in conflict or negotiation.

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Guidelines

A.

Study and understand the stratagems: Familiarize yourself with the 36 Stratagems and their applications. Learn about historical examples where these strategies have been employed successfully.

B.

Assess the situation: Analyze the specific context, including the nature of the conflict, the strengths and weaknesses of the parties involved, and the desired outcomes. Identify the strategic opportunities and potential risks.

C.

Choose the appropriate stratagem: Select the stratagem that best aligns with your goals and the circumstances at hand. Consider the specific challenges you face and how the stratagem can address them.

D.

Adapt and modify as needed: Recognize that the stratagems are not rigid formulas but rather guiding principles. Tailor and adjust them to suit the unique aspects of your situation. Flexibility and creativity are essential.

E.

Maintain secrecy and deception: Many stratagems rely on secrecy and misdirection. Guard your true intentions and plans, while actively misleading or confusing your opponents. Keep them off balance and uncertain.

F.

Understand human psychology: The stratagems often exploit psychological tendencies and behaviors. Consider the emotions, motivations, and biases of the parties involved to maximize the effectiveness of your chosen stratagem.

G.

Timing is crucial: Proper timing can significantly enhance the impact of a stratagem. Identify the opportune moments to execute your strategy for maximum effect. Patience and strategic patience are essential virtues.

H.

Assess and manage risks: Every stratagem carries risks and potential drawbacks. Evaluate the potential consequences and ensure that the benefits outweigh the potential costs. Mitigate risks where possible.

I.

Practice adaptability: Be prepared to adjust your approach as the situation evolves. Circumstances may change, and new opportunities or challenges may arise. Stay nimble and ready to switch strategies if necessary.

J.

Learn from successes and failures: Evaluate the outcomes of your chosen stratagems. Understand what worked well and what could be improved. Apply these lessons to future situations.

Reminder, the 36 Stratagems are tools to be used ethically and responsibly.

They should be employed with the intention of achieving positive outcomes and resolving conflicts effectively.

Background:

The Thirty-Six Stratagems derived its name from the Biography of Wáng Jìngzé in the Book of Qi. It recounts the story of Wáng, a general who rebelled against Emperor Ming out of fear for his own safety. Wáng referred to Lord Tán's retreat as the best strategy, using the term "thirty-six stratagems" metaphorically to denote numerous strategies rather than a specific number.

Although the true authorship of the Thirty-Six Stratagems is uncertain, they have been attributed to Sun Tzu and Zhuge Liang in Chinese history. However, historians believe that different versions of the stratagems were compiled over time, drawing from both written and oral sources. Some stratagems even reference events from the time of Sun Bin, who lived approximately 150 years after Sun Tzu's death.

The current version of the Thirty-Six Stratagems is based on an original hand-copied paperback discovered in Shaanxi province, China, with an unknown date and author. It was later published by a local publisher in 1941 and gained public attention after a review in the Guangming Daily newspaper in 1961. The stratagems are organized into a preface, six chapters, and an incomplete afterword, with the first three chapters focusing on advantageous situations and the last three on disadvantageous ones.

Written in a concise style typical of Classical Chinese, each proverb is accompanied by a brief comment explaining its applicability to military tactics. The stratagems draw inspiration from 36 battle scenarios in Chinese history and folklore, particularly from the Warring States period and the Three Kingdoms Period.

The Thirty-Six Stratagems provide a collection of strategic wisdom that combines historical events, metaphorical language, and practical applications for military and non-military situations.

Understanding the Thirty-Six Stratagems is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of strategic thinking and decision-making. While Sun Tzu's masterpiece primarily delves into the principles of military strategy, the Thirty-Six Stratagems offers a broader perspective by encompassing tactics used in politics, war, and everyday interactions.

The Thirty-Six Stratagems places a strong emphasis on the cunning use of deception and manipulation, highlighting the importance of adaptability and the ability to outmanoeuvre opponents. By studying these stratagems, individuals can gain insights into the art of deception and the power of psychological warfare, which are crucial in various domains of life, including politics, business, and personal relationships.

Drawing parallels with Sun Tzu's Art of War, the Thirty-Six Stratagems reinforces the significance of strategic thinking and planning. It explores different approaches to achieve victory and success, considering factors such as timing, positioning, and exploiting the weaknesses of opponents. By combining the wisdom of both texts, one can develop a well-rounded approach to strategic decision-making, incorporating both military and non-military contexts.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Zhang Yingyu's The Book of Swindles adds another layer of depth to the study. This late-Ming-dynasty work expands the scope of strategic thinking beyond warfare and politics, focusing on the realms of commerce and civil society. By exploring tactics employed in business transactions and interpersonal relationships, individuals can develop a nuanced understanding of the art of persuasion and negotiation.

The study of the Thirty-Six Stratagems alongside Sun Tzu's Art of War offers a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to strategic thinking. By incorporating military, political, and social aspects, these texts provide valuable insights into the tactics and strategies employed in various arenas of life. Understanding these principles equips individuals with the tools to navigate complex situations, make informed decisions, and ultimately achieve success.

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Mohammed Abbasi

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United Kingdom

The Thirty-Six Stratagems is organized into six chapters, each chapter contains six stratagems that offer strategic insights for various situations.

Chapter 1: Winning Stratagems

1.

Deceive the heavens to cross the sea:

Conceal your true intentions from those in power who lack foresight. By keeping your plans and movements hidden, you can achieve your goals without alerting your adversaries.

Example: During World War II, the Allies employed deception tactics to mislead the Axis powers about their intended targets. Operation Fortitude, for instance, utilized fake radio transmissions and inflatable tanks to deceive the Germans into believing that the Allied invasion would occur at Calais instead of Normandy.

2.

Besiege Wèi to rescue Zhào:

When confronted with a strong enemy, avoid direct confrontation and instead target something they value. By attacking their vulnerabilities or diverting their attention, you weaken their overall position.

Example: In ancient China, during the era of the Three Kingdoms, the warlord Cao Cao had trapped the city of Zhào but was unable to capture it. Liu Bei, a rival warlord, took advantage of Cao Cao's focus on Zhào and attacked his homeland of Wèi, forcing Cao Cao to abandon the siege and rush back to defend his own territory.

3.

Kill with a borrowed knife:

When your own resources are insufficient, leverage the strength of others. Trick an ally or manipulate the enemy into attacking each other, using their power and influence to achieve your objectives.

Example: During the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, Alcibiades, an Athenian general, successfully persuaded the Persian Empire to provide financial and military support to Athens. With this borrowed strength, Athens was able to inflict heavy losses on Sparta and gain an advantage in the conflict.

4.

Wait at leisure while the enemy labours:

Choose the time and place of battle strategically. Allow the enemy to exhaust themselves in futile efforts while conserving your own strength. When the enemy is weakened and confused, strike decisively.

Example: In the Battle of Guandu during the Three Kingdoms period, the warlord Cao Cao set a trap for his rival, Yuan Shao. Cao Cao feigned weakness and retreated, luring Yuan Shao's forces into chasing him. Exhausted and scattered, Yuan Shao's army was vulnerable, and Cao Cao seized the opportunity to launch a counterattack and secure victory.

5.

Loot a burning house:

Exploit the internal troubles of your enemy, such as divisions, corruption, or other weaknesses. When your adversary is weakened by internal turmoil, seize the opportunity to attack aggressively and eliminate future threats.

Example: During the fall of the Roman Empire, various barbarian tribes took advantage of the empire's internal strife, corruption, and economic decline to invade and plunder its territories, hastening the empire's collapse.

6.

Make a sound in the east, then strike in the west:

Surprise is a potent weapon in warfare. Even when facing the enemy directly, you can achieve surprise by attacking where they least expect it. Utilize feints, distractions, and misdirection to confuse the enemy before launching a decisive strike.

Example: In the Battle of Hastings in 1066, William the Conqueror of Normandy deceived the Anglo-Saxon forces led by Harold Godwinson. William pretended to retreat, luring Harold's troops to pursue them. Once the Anglo-Saxons were scattered and disorganized, William's forces turned and launched a surprise attack, ultimately winning the battle and establishing Norman rule in England.

Chapter 2: Enemy Dealing Stratagems

7.

Create something from nothing:

Utilize deception to make the enemy believe in the existence or non-existence of something that isn't true. By manipulating perception, you can mislead and confuse the enemy.

Example: During World War II, the Allies employed a strategic deception plan known as Operation Fortitude. They created a fictitious army and deployed false radio transmissions and inflatable tanks to convince the Germans that the main invasion force would target Calais instead of Normandy. This created a diversion and allowed the actual invasion to take place successfully.

8.

Openly repair the gallery roads, but sneak through the passage of Chencang:

Deceive the enemy by employing an obvious and time-consuming approach, while secretly utilizing an alternative route. By diverting the enemy's attention with visible actions, you can execute a hidden plan or launch a surprise attack.

Example: In the Battle of Red Cliffs during the Three Kingdoms period in China, the allied forces of Liu Bei and Sun Quan pretended to build roads and repair their fleet openly, giving the impression that they were preparing for a direct confrontation with the enemy, Cao Cao. However, they secretly sent fire ships downwind, which caused massive damage to Cao Cao's fleet and led to his defeat.

9.

Watch the fires burning across the river:

Observe from a distance as other parties engage in conflict and exhaust themselves. When they are weakened, seize the opportunity to enter the battle at full strength and swiftly eliminate the remaining opponents.

Example: In the Second Punic War, Hannibal, the Carthaginian general, utilized the strategy of watching the fires burning across the river. He allowed the Roman forces to engage in battles and exert themselves in various regions while strategically avoiding direct confrontation. Once the Romans were weakened, Hannibal struck with his full force, winning significant victories against them.

10.

Hide a knife behind a smile:

Gain the trust of the enemy through charm and flattery. Once trust is established, exploit their vulnerability and strike unexpectedly.

Example: During the Cold War, Soviet spy Aldrich Ames gained the trust of his American colleagues through his friendly and sociable demeanor. While acting as a double agent, Ames provided sensitive information to the Soviet Union, causing significant damage to U.S. intelligence operations.

11.

Sacrifice the plum tree to preserve the peach tree:

In certain situations, make short-term sacrifices to achieve long-term goals. This strategy involves assigning blame or diverting attention away from crucial objectives to ensure their preservation.

Example: In politics, a leader may sacrifice a lower-ranking official or take responsibility for a minor issue to protect a more influential figure or safeguard important policies from scrutiny.

12.

Take the opportunity to pilfer a goat:

Remain adaptable in the execution of plans and seize any available opportunity, no matter how small, to gain an advantage or benefit. This strategy emphasizes resourcefulness and making the most of favorable circumstances.

Example: In military operations, commanders may exploit temporary weaknesses in the enemy's defenses or exploit distractions to infiltrate and gather valuable intelligence or capture critical positions.

Chapter 3: Offensive Stratagems

13.

Stomp the grass to scare the snake:

Provoke a response from the enemy by engaging in an action that appears unrelated but captures their attention. This unexpected move disrupts their thinking, revealing their plans or position. By causing suspicion and confusion, one gains an advantage.

Example: During World War II, the Allies employed a campaign of deception known as Operation Bodyguard. By creating fictitious army divisions and false radio transmissions, they misled the German forces about the location of the main invasion force, diverting their attention from the actual target, Normandy.

14.

Borrow a corpse to resurrect the soul:

Revive or repurpose forgotten or discarded resources, methods, or ideologies for one's own benefit. By appropriating existing assets, one can leverage their potential and bring them back to life.

Example: The Renaissance period in Europe witnessed the revival and rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts, art, and ideas. Scholars and artists of the time drew inspiration from these classical works, breathing new life into them and sparking a cultural and intellectual rebirth.

15.

Lure the tiger down the mountain:

Avoid direct confrontation with a superior opponent holding a positional advantage. Instead, entice them away from their position, separating them from their source of strength. By luring them into unfamiliar territory, their advantage diminishes, and they become vulnerable.

Example: In the Battle of Saratoga during the American Revolutionary War, General Horatio Gates used a strategy of luring British General John Burgoyne down from his strong defensive position. Gates's forces occupied favorable terrain, forcing Burgoyne to leave his defensive works and engage in open battle, ultimately resulting in a decisive American victory.

16.

In order to capture, one must let loose:

When facing a cornered opponent, allow them to believe they still have a chance of escape. This false sense of hope weakens their morale and hampers their will to fight. As their optimism fades, the illusion of escape shatters, leading to their surrender without resistance.

Example: In the Siege of Yorktown during the American Revolutionary War, General George Washington's forces trapped the British army under General Cornwallis. Instead of launching a direct assault, Washington maintained a siege and allowed Cornwallis to believe that reinforcement or evacuation was possible. This psychological pressure, coupled with the French navy's blockade, ultimately led to Cornwallis's surrender.

17.

Tossing out a brick to lure a jade gem:

Entice someone by offering them something of lesser value or provoking a reaction. By presenting an apparently valuable opportunity or challenge, one can extract something more valuable from them in return. This strategy capitalizes on the principle of reciprocity to gain an advantageous exchange.

Example: During diplomatic negotiations, a country may propose a minor concession or demand from the other side to provoke a counteroffer. By appearing to make a significant compromise, they create an opportunity to secure their own desired outcome.

18.

Defeat the enemy by capturing their chief:

When facing an enemy whose loyalty to their leader is superficial and based on external factors, targeting the leader can cause the rest of the army to disperse or even switch sides. However, if the army's allegiance stems from genuine loyalty, eliminating their leader may fuel their desire for vengeance and intensify their resistance.

Example: In ancient Chinese history, the capture or assassination of a warlord or emperor often resulted in the collapse of their armies or the emergence of rival factions vying for power. However, if the army was deeply loyal to their leader, his demise could galvanize their determination to fight on, sometimes even more fiercely.

Chapter 4: Melee Stratagems

19.

Remove the firewood from under the pot:

Target and neutralize the key argument or asset of an opponent. By undermining their main source of strength or advantage, one can diminish their ability to wage war or compete effectively. This indirect approach focuses on weakening the enemy's foundation rather than directly engaging their forces.

Example: In military history, the Allies' strategic bombing campaign during World War II targeted Germany's industrial infrastructure, aiming to disrupt their production capabilities and weaken their war effort.

20.

Disturb the water and catch a fish:

Create chaos or confusion in order to exploit the situation for personal gain. By introducing disruption or instability, one can capitalize on the resulting disarray to advance their own goals and interests.

Example: During political elections, spreading misinformation or launching smear campaigns against opponents can create confusion among voters and potentially sway public opinion in favor of a particular candidate.

21.

Slough off the cicada's golden shell:

Conceal one's true identity or intentions by shedding distinctive traits or assuming a different persona. This strategy involves adopting a disguise or blending in with the surroundings to escape from a more powerful adversary.

Example: Sun Tzu's "The Art of War" mentions the use of spies and intelligence gathering to gather information about the enemy while maintaining secrecy and camouflage.

22.

Shut the door to catch the thief:

Before launching a decisive attack or capturing the enemy, cut off their escape routes and external support. By strategically closing off avenues of retreat or assistance, one can trap the enemy and prevent their escape, ensuring a more successful outcome.

Example: The Battle of Stalingrad in World War II saw the Soviet forces encircle and cut off the German Sixth Army, isolating them from supplies and reinforcements. This strategic maneuver led to the eventual surrender of the German forces.

23.

Befriend a distant state and strike a neighboring one:

Forge alliances with distant nations while focusing on conquering neighboring states. This approach allows for the consolidation of conquered territories, easier supply lines, and stronger defensive positions. By establishing distant alliances, one can avoid the risk and logistical challenges of attacking those faraway nations.

Example: In ancient China, the state of Qin, under the leadership of Qin Shi Huang, formed an alliance with the distant state of Qi to launch a successful campaign against the neighboring state of Chu. This strategy helped Qin expand its territory and increase its power.

24.

Obtain safe passage to conquer the State of Guo:

Borrow resources or support from an ally to launch an attack against a common enemy. Once the enemy is defeated, use the acquired resources to turn against the ally that initially provided assistance.

Example: During the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians secured safe passage through Megara to attack the city-state of Corinth. However, after defeating Corinth, the Athenians turned against Megara, conquering and subjugating them as well.

Chapter 5: Combined Stratagems

25.

Replace the beams with rotten timbers:

Disrupt the enemy's formations and methods of operation by introducing changes and undermining their established rules. By removing the crucial support and coordination that holds their forces together, their effectiveness can be compromised.

Example: In military history, during the Battle of Cannae, Hannibal employed a double envelopment strategy, encircling and collapsing the Roman forces from the flanks. This unexpected maneuver disrupted the Roman formation and led to their decisive defeat.

26.

Point at the mulberry tree while cursing the locust tree:

Indirectly discipline, control, or warn others who hold positions of authority. Use analogy and innuendo to convey criticism without directly naming individuals, making it difficult for them to retaliate without revealing their involvement or complicity.

Example: In political contexts, public figures or leaders may use veiled statements or allusions to criticize opponents without explicitly naming them. This allows them to express disapproval or raise concerns while maintaining plausible deniability.

27.

Feign madness but keep your balance:

Pretend to be incompetent or irrational to confuse opponents and create doubt about one's true intentions and capabilities. By luring the enemy into underestimating one's abilities, their guard may be lowered, providing an opportunity for strategic advantage.

Example: In the Trojan War, the Greeks used the tactic of the Trojan Horse, pretending to abandon the siege and leaving behind a massive wooden horse as an offering. The Trojans, deceived by the apparent retreat, brought the horse inside their city walls, unaware that Greek soldiers were hidden inside, ultimately leading to their defeat.

28.

Remove the ladder when the enemy has ascended to the roof:

Deceive the enemy by leading them into treacherous terrain or circumstances where their lines of communication and escape routes are cut off. By trapping them, they are forced to confront both your forces and the challenges posed by the environment.

Example: During the Battle of Agincourt in the Hundred Years' War, the English forces, greatly outnumbered by the French, lured the enemy into a narrow and muddy battlefield. The difficult terrain impeded the French cavalry charge and restricted their mobility, resulting in a decisive victory for the English.

29.

Decorate the tree with false blossoms:

Create an illusion of value or worth by disguising something of little significance as something desirable. Through artifice and deception, make the worthless appear valuable and vice versa.

Example: In politics, candidates or parties may employ propaganda techniques to embellish their achievements or manipulate public perception by highlighting certain aspects while downplaying or concealing others. This can create a false sense of accomplishment or importance.

30.

Make the host and the guest exchange roles:

Infiltrate a situation where one is typically subordinate and gradually assume leadership or control. Initially, pretend to be a guest or follower to gain acceptance, but then assert authority and become the dominant figure from within.

Example: In historical contexts, there have been instances of trusted advisors or subordinates gradually gaining influence and power, eventually surpassing their superiors and taking control. This can occur in political, military, or organizational settings.

Chapter 6: Defeat Stratagems

31.

The beauty trap (Honeypot):

Send alluring women to the enemy's camp to sow discord and create distractions. This strategy exploits the weaknesses and desires of the enemy, causing the ruler to neglect his duties, provoking conflicts among men competing for the women's attention, and fostering jealousy and subversion among court females.

Example: In ancient China, the legendary beauty Xi Shi was sent by the Kingdom of Yue to the Kingdom of Wu to seduce and distract the ruler, Goujian. As a result, Goujian's focus shifted from state affairs, allowing the Kingdom of Yue to gain an advantage.

32.

The empty fort strategy:

When faced with overwhelming enemy forces, remain calm and taunt the enemy as if one possesses a hidden, powerful force. This strategy aims to intimidate the enemy and discourage them from attacking, relying on their fear of falling into an ambush.

Example: During the Three Kingdoms period in China, the military strategist Zhuge Liang used the empty fort strategy when he found himself vastly outnumbered by the forces of Sima Yi. Zhuge Liang ordered his soldiers to open the gates of the fort, play music, and relax, giving the illusion of a trap. Sima Yi, suspecting a trap, chose not to attack, allowing Zhuge Liang to successfully defend his position.

33.

Let the enemy's own spy sow discord in the enemy camp:

Exploit the presence of a spy within the enemy's ranks to create conflicts and divisions among their own forces. By manipulating the spy's actions and information, internal disputes and mistrust can weaken the enemy's ability to fight effectively.

Example: During World War II, the British intelligence agency MI6 successfully turned German spy Juan Pujol García (code-named "Garbo") into a double agent. Garbo provided false information to the Germans while also sowing discord among their ranks, which significantly hindered their military operations.

34.

Inflict injury on oneself to win the enemy's trust:

Simulate injuries or weakness to deceive the enemy into underestimating one's capabilities. By appearing harmless or vulnerable, the enemy may lower their guard, allowing for an opportunity to strike when they least expect it.

Example: In the Battle of Chibi in ancient China, the warlord Zhou Yu, facing the superior forces of Cao Cao, pretended to be ill and bedridden. Cao Cao, considering Zhou Yu no longer a threat, let his guard down, allowing Zhou Yu's forces to launch a surprise attack and secure victory.

35.

Chain stratagems:

Employ a series of stratagems one after another, forming a chain of interconnected tactics. By implementing multiple strategies simultaneously, if one fails, the next is ready to be executed, ensuring flexibility and adaptability in achieving the desired outcome.

Example: The Allied invasion of Normandy during World War II, known as D-Day, utilized a series of interlinked stratagems. These included deception operations like the use of dummy armies and fake radio transmissions, combined with surprise landings and coordinated attacks from multiple directions, ultimately leading to the successful liberation of Western Europe.

36.

If all else fails, retreat:

When it becomes evident that the current course of action will result in defeat, choose to retreat and regroup. Surrender is a complete defeat, compromise is a partial defeat, but escape allows for the possibility of future success.

Example: During the Battle of Dunkirk in World War II, the British Expeditionary Force, faced with overwhelming German forces, organized a massive evacuation operation to retreat from the beaches of Dunkirk, France. While it was a retreat, the successful evacuation allowed the British to preserve their forces and continue the fight against Nazi Germany.

Conclusion:

The 36 Stratagems serve as a timeless source of wisdom and guidance in navigating the complex landscapes of conflict, competition, and negotiation. This collection of strategies, honed through centuries of military and political history, offers valuable insights into the art of strategy and the human dynamics at play in strategic decision-making.

As a student of military history and strategy, I have delved deep into the nuances of these stratagems, examining their applications in diverse contexts and drawing inspiration from historical examples. Through my book and speaking engagements, I have had the privilege of sharing these insights with audiences around the world, engaging in stimulating discussions and workshops.

However, my journey doesn't end here. I am committed to continued exploration and research, expanding my knowledge and deepening my understanding of strategy and its practical applications. I am dedicated to refining and developing new insights, staying attuned to the evolving dynamics of our global landscape.

But I don't walk this path alone. I am grateful for the support and encouragement of readers, attendees, and collaborators who have embraced my work and found value in the knowledge I have shared. It is through your enthusiasm and engagement that I am inspired to further contribute and write more, bringing fresh perspectives and practical strategies to the forefront.

I invite you, dear reader, to join me on this ongoing journey of exploration and discovery. Let us continue to exchange ideas, challenge conventional thinking, and find innovative solutions to the complex challenges we face. Together, we can forge new paths, elevate the art of strategy, and make a lasting impact in our pursuits.

Thank you for your trust, support, and the opportunity to share my passion for military history and strategy. I look forward to our continued collaboration and the exciting possibilities that lie ahead.

With warm regards,

Mohammed Abbasi

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A photograph of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi shaking hands. Xi Jinping is on the left, wearing a light blue shirt and a black belt. Narendra Modi is on the right, wearing a white kurta with a gold border and a white shawl. They are both smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

Towards 2030 and beyond:

"China and India will be the future superpowers that will shape help shape this planet, we must turn our gaze towards their rich histories and profound philosophies and cease playing games against them as both nations and peoples have long memories.

Read their past and you will have the keys to dealing positively with these mighty nations. To gain insights into the forces that will shape tomorrow's world, you must immerse yourself in the timeless wisdom of their philosophers and the tapestry of their histories.

In the depths of their cultural heritage, you can see the paths these emerging superpowers are destined to tread."

- M M Abbasi