

Forming and Transforming Energy: Strategies from the Art of War

by Barry Boyce and James Gimian

The Art of War teaches us how to work more deftly with the underlying energies in the campaigns we find ourselves in—at home, at work, and in our communities. The central teaching of the Art of War is shih (pronounced “shir,” with almost no vowel sound), which concerns how to act dynamically and effectively within the interconnected world we’re part of. Shih describes how energy flows within certain patterns—how it moves, gathers, focuses, and releases in any system or situation. Shih is not a mystical force. To use a natural-world analogy, the buildup of energy is like a system of mountain rivulets, creeks, streams, and waterfalls that come together to form a large and powerful river.

The text teaches us how to work with shih in order to see, capitalize on, and even affect the buildup and release of energy in order to bring about a favorable result. Working with shih can be as simple as sensing when to break an awkward silence with a humorous comment, or as complex as observing when the entire direction of one’s marketplace or community is about to shift and knowing how to exploit that shifting energy. When we fixate on obstacles as impediments to getting what we want, our severely limited perspective prevents us from using the energy available in the situation. Working with shih teaches us to let energy function by itself rather than trying to manufacture a solution to deal with perceived obstacles. If someone is angry, for example, we could rely on reactive approaches—perhaps trying to vanquish or ignore their rage—or we could notice how its inherent power might be redirected.

The Art of War gives us rich images and analogies to teach us about the power of shih, such as “the rush of water, to the point of tossing rocks about” or “rolling round rocks from a mile-high mountain.” In this way, the Art of War encourages us to observe closely how power and energy collects, builds momentum, and is released in a moment. It asks us to pay fine attention to the terrain we find ourselves in. It asks us to transcend a limited vantage point and operate from the largest perspective we can find.

Within this profound teaching on how to work with reality at such a deep level, the text presents forming and transforming as a vital pair of strategic practices. Forming is the shape we give to ourselves and our world. Transforming is the way that shape changes in relation to the conditions in the world, and most particularly in relation to our objective and the obstacles that might lie in our path. Simply put, when we remember that everything is interconnected, we realize that how we are and how we act affects everything around us.

Presence

We start the process of forming and transforming by creating victorious conditions in ourselves. We recognize that how we conduct ourselves and interact with others communicates an enormous amount to the world around us. Just by walking around, we change the world.

The text presents knowing oneself as the first step, which leads us to emphasize the importance of character, or one’s way of being. This could also be called presence, as it is the quality of being fully present and connected to the world in a way that brings effectiveness and confidence. Presence can have a significant impact in ordinary times, but it brings even greater benefit in more extreme conditions. Like a military commander in battle or a teacher in a chaotic classroom, anyone able to hold her composure and perspective in the middle of chaos—to absorb the energy, integrate it into her own perspective, and hold it while others might be freaking out—communicates confidence and strength to others.

Forming

Forming is any gesture of extending into space, starting with the simple arrangement of things in your world. How you set up your workspace, what chair you sit in when leading a meeting, what food and drinks you serve, the air and the lighting, how you initiate a conversation or communicate news, the moment you choose to shift the course of a discussion—all these have impact. On a slightly larger level, the position you take on a critical issue will shape the decision-making options for your colleagues and coworkers. These kinds of strategic actions can contribute to creating victorious environments. The text says

One skilled at moving the enemy

Forms and the enemy must follow,

Offers and the enemy must take.

Forming is most effective when it includes the perspective of the whole, paying attention to all the factors likely to affect a situation. If you are growing a garden, the right mix of air, heat, water, and earth allows the seeds to take root and flourish. If those elements aren’t balanced properly, it may not matter what else you do.

An excellent example of forming came to us in a story about a city councillor whose neighborhood became a battleground involving students, landlords, the university, and local homeowners.

University policies had increased the number of students seeking housing in family neighborhoods. Landlords used zoning loopholes to create subpar rooming houses that nevertheless carried high rents. So, the houses became packed with students, who made noise and littered garbage around the neighborhood. Police patrols and punishing the students did not affect the landlords, and thus they couldn't be drawn in to discussions to address the problems. The councillor took the unusual and politically dangerous step of pushing through a bylaw that assessed fines on the landlords for infractions committed by their tenants. This immediately brought the wrath of the landlords and jeopardized her re-election. However, it also got their attention, and brought them to the table. They saw that responsible behavior would strengthen rather than threaten their rental business; as a result, subsequent fall move-in seasons have been successively quieter. The councillor formed the ground by an action outside of the habitual self-interested approach of protecting her political future, and achieved a result no one would have imagined possible at the outset.

Container Principle

We can apply the skill of forming in a variety of ways. Our action might take the form of a very broad gesture with no specific goal associated with it, or it could take the form of a detailed and intensified campaign that involves managing the whole experience of those we encounter. This more comprehensive application is what we and our colleagues have come to call "the container principle." When you want to go beyond merely forming to shaping the options and intensifying the result, applying the container principle is a natural next step.

A container serves to hold something, either something of value we want to protect or something we want to limit the spread of. The container, as we define it, forms the environment for that thing by establishing boundaries and points of entry and exit, which we call gateways. The boundary—most often the walls or the sides of the container—provides the obstacle, the resistance, the hard part, the "no." And the gateways have the quality of openness and vulnerability, the soft part, the "yes." An effective container has a good relationship between boundary and gateway. The boundary or barrier is definite, but the gateway makes the container permeable.

Our lives are filled with examples of the container principle. Our houses or apartments are containers, not only for people and goods but also for the energy and activity that go on there. Temples, cathedrals, legislative chambers, museums, and myriad other public spaces are all intended to inspire a particular frame of mind and sense of reverence—and egress and ingress are carefully guarded. Offices, cubicles, and workspaces generally heavily influence the activity that occurs within. The container principle can also be seen at work in societal norms, government laws, treaties, and rules of engagement, which shape our behavior in the same way that mountain slopes shape the flow of water.

In experiences that are all too common—such as facing a critical presentation at work or having to deliver a difficult message to a teenage child—we are so focused on the impending conflict that we don't think about how the container or environment can aid us in our task. Yet we can feel the difference between a formal meeting across the boss's desk and coffee at the local café. We're familiar with the limits of screaming about homework over the chaos and noise called family mealtime. Events and their environment—the container and its contents—are intimately interconnected, and missing how the environment affects the outcome loses the advantage that comes from relying on the power of shih.

Transforming

To be able to transform with the enemy is what is meant by "spiritlike."

We can't allow ourselves to get stuck in the ground we've shaped or how we've shaped it, but rather we continue to transform—in relation to the goal we seek and the obstacles to achieving it. There is no lasting form: whatever worked in the past, another form may be called for now.

Regardless of how brilliant the plan that got you where you are, holding on to it can become a liability if it doesn't continue to reflect reality as the ground changes. Loosening the grip on a specific, known solution allows space for transforming. Then, multiple options or solutions can arise, for both ourselves and others. The text tells us that transforming renders us "spiritlike"—untouchable, not graspable or solid, and thus not able to be attacked. By holding firmly yet loosely to the aim, we give chaos and uncertainty the space to sort themselves out. Insights beyond what we might expect can arise more readily.

A simple, everyday example of transforming comes from the world of the grade-school classroom. To make the chaos of a third-grade classroom workable, a good teacher has to consistently create and maintain a container for learning, in order to form the maelstrom of energies flying around the room into a learning environment. Naturally, this involves a relatively high degree of control, but as educator Richard Brown points out, this control can also become an obstacle in class discussion. "As teachers, we can hold on too tightly to our idea of having a successful classroom, and in asking students to share their thoughts, we can subtly try to control them." Brown, among others, teaches a technique that asks teachers to wait three seconds before calling on someone. Inevitably, more hands go up. After calling on someone and hearing his or her response, the teacher waits an additional three seconds before commenting. In that short period of time, Brown says, teachers can give up control and step out of the role of conveying information and transform into listeners. When students see their teachers learning in front of them it has a powerful effect.

Forming the ground starts with the intention to succeed and the strong exertion required to do so. But when we push something, it moves and changes, so we've got to adjust our exertion to respond to the changed ground. First we form, but then we must transform. We cannot remain fixed, nor can we expect to permanently fix others or the environment. Continuing to push in the same direction that got us where we are can be counterproductive.

Beyond Form

The key to the practice of forming and transforming, as the text clearly tells us, is being without form:

And so the skilled general forms others yet is without form.

As a "skilled general," we must not get stuck in any form we employ. Transforming requires a leap, yet there is a still larger leap of not solidifying or fixating on form itself. Being "without form" means not regarding the form of any situation as the ultimate reality but rather as an ever-changing manifestation. This has simple yet profound advantages:

The ultimate in giving form to the military is to arrive at formlessness.

Formlessness means shaping the ground, taking a firm and definite position, yet not fixating on it as the only solution. This doesn't mean we don't care or believe in the position we've taken. It means maintaining an allegiance to a bigger solution, one that serves the larger whole more than it serves one particular plan. Being formless isn't abstaining from engagement; indeed, it is engaging deeply and entering the play of forming and transforming. It simply means not grasping onto any particular form, which allows the forming and transforming to be powerful and effective.

Aikido offers a fine example. The founder of aikido, O'Sensei Morihei Ueshiba, mastered many martial arts. Yet it dawned on him that no matter how strong he might become, there could always be someone stronger. So he based his new martial art not on solidity and strength but rather on offering no fixed form to be attacked. Aikido is a practice of forming and transforming, using the opponent's own energy of attack to bring about a victorious resolution by becoming formless. His counterintuitive insight was that not taking a fortified position—not being "there" in a solid and fixed way—was the strongest position. Combining forming and formlessness gives aikido its power and effectiveness.

The ability to respond to form is not about how many clever plans we devise, nor is it about holding steadfastly to our role or position. It's about being in touch with whatever arises, and capitalizing on emerging solutions:

Do not repeat the means of victory, But respond to form from the inexhaustible.

Strategy in Practice

Nancy stared out her office window into the cold twilight. Everyone had already gone home from the progressive day care center she founded almost two decades before. Another restless sleep loomed.

The center was in crisis. The administrator she hired five years ago had started out strong and made many improvements. The workers and parents liked him, but of late they had turned against many of his decisions. His recent moves were met with vehement resistance. A "tone" had crept into his messages to parents and staff. The atmosphere was toxic.

Earlier that day, Nancy had watched from her window as parents handed out fliers for an upcoming meeting organized to make a formal complaint and propose withholding tuition payments. She was at a loss about what to do. Bob had become a close friend, but was now an obstacle. Firing him would mean caving into a vocal minority of parents and staff, and there were also employment law issues to consider. But she was unhappy with the job he was doing and so frustrated that she was ready to just leave behind all that she had built.

Nancy was open to any suggestion for help, and her friends gave many, from coaches to mediation experts to group-process consultants. One friend suggested the Art of War, saying it was very helpful in embattled situations.

Through the lens of shih, Nancy could see the upcoming parents' meeting as a defining moment, when the configuration of energy would reach a high point. She needed to work with that ground. Acting quickly, she invited Bob to share an agenda-free lunch at her house on Saturday. She created an accommodating container—her home rather than the office, and a lovely meal—when Bob was braced for trouble. At the end of lunch, after they had relaxed with talk of their own children, she pointed out to him that events had clearly reached a point where things would change—no matter how much he or she may want them to stay the same. They would need to be there for the parents' meeting, to face the gathering storm. Through her gentle shaping of the situation, Bob faced the discomfort and unease that he had been feeling about this meeting, and realized it was important.

Nancy wanted the airing of the problems and grievances to take place in an environment of openness, so she invited the organizers to use one of the day care's rooms. In her mind, the playful child's environment would not only be neutral ground, but it would also make the children participants in the discussion. She and Bob would attend, but the organizers would run the meeting. She only asked for the opportunity for them to make some statements toward the end of the meeting. The organizers agreed.

On the night of the event, Nancy and Bob prepared the room, making sure that there were tasty refreshments and setting up chairs in a circle to accommodate open discussion. The meeting was very high energy but as time went on, the most

aggressive energy depleted and some humor even emerged. Nancy was letting the energy function by itself, trusting that the anger would be balanced out by the parents' appreciation of the loving care that their children were getting at the center. By observing quietly rather than trying to dominate the meeting as "the leader," she surprised many of the parents and even unnerved the more extreme ones.

When it came time for Nancy to speak, she simply asked everyone, including her and Bob, to take a few minutes to say why they were involved with this center as opposed to any other. When the sessions had finished, she said good night and mingled with people afterward. She dropped her effort to win everyone over to her side, becoming "spiritlike" as she hung out with the parents without an agenda. It took hard work to keep dropping her habitual way of acting, but it also seemed fresh and even exhilarating.

In a follow-up letter, Nancy asked for a moratorium on major changes and suggested that they reconvene the parents' meeting monthly. Bob concluded that he had done all he could do at the center and started looking for new employment, with his self-confidence and positive feelings about the school intact. A search committee was struck to find Bob's successor. Life was not perfect, but things moved on, with much less pain and anguish.

Had Nancy not applied what she had learned from the Art of War, she might well have taken some of these same actions. The main influence of the Art of War, however, was to inspire her to stop working so hard to hold on to her fixed positions and defend her ground. She was therefore free to form situations, then be formed and transformed by them. She worked directly with the conflict, but she didn't have to counterattack. By stepping outside the role of commanding and controlling, she let solutions emerge rather than having to cook them up all the time. Nancy started to get some sleep and could get up in the morning with enthusiasm about her life's work once again.

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Adapted from an article in mindful.org, an online magazine. James Gimian, a friend and faculty of ALIA, is publisher of the [Shambhala Sun](http://ShambhalaSun.com) and *Mindful* magazines. He has been studying and teaching the Sun Tzu text for more than 25 years. He served as general editor of the Denma Translation of *The Art of War*, published in 2001. Barry Boyce is editor-in-chief of *Mindful* magazine. He is editor of, and contributor in, *The Mindfulness Revolution* (2011) and co-author, with James Gimian, of *The Rules of Victory: How to Transform Chaos and Conflict—Strategies from the Art of War* (2008).