

Research on the Battle of White Wolf Mountain

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Abstract The Battle of White Wolf Mountain (207) was one of the most important battles in late Eastern Han Dynasty (184-220). It symbolized the demise of Wuhuan, a powerful nomadic tribe living near the northeast border of Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). At the same time, the victory of this battle signified that Cao Cao (155-220) and his military group further unified the north of China. What's more, it was a classical battle that the army of the Han nationality defeated the nomads with cavalry.

1. Introduction

When researching the cavalry of Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220), the researchers usually focus on Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-8). Because it was one of the most important periods of Chinese cavalry. In this period, the basic tactic of Chinese cavalry finally took shape. At the same time, the cavalry commanders of this era such as Wei Qing (?-106 B.C.) and Huo Qubing (140-117 B.C.) were too famous. It leads to a phenomenon that only a few researchers will pay attention to the cavalry of Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). Though late Eastern Han Dynasty was an important period in Chinese war history, most researchers would spent time on the wars of Han nationality's warlords when researching the history of this period. The battles between the Han nationality and the nomads were usually ignored.

However, many battles of this period which happened near the border of Han Empire are worth researching. The Battle of White Wolf Mountain was one of them. This paper will analyse it in detail from the angles of tactic and strategy.

In the process of researching, the largest difficulty I met was to find a good point to make a combination between the battle itself and some military concepts. Learning in order to practise is of great importance. At the same time, it can make the description of the battle much more vivid.

2. Historical background

2.1 The war between Cao Cao and Yuan Shao

From the 190s to 200s, four generals of Han Dynasty became the warlords who occupied the north region of the empire. They were Cao Cao, Yuan Shao (?-202), Gongsun Zan (?-199) and Gongsun Du (?-204). Two nomadic tribes

(famous for their cavalry) named Wuhuan and Sumbe were involved in their wars. During the war between Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan, Wuhuan chose to follow the lead of Yuan Shao ^[1] ^[2]. Gongsun Zan's territory was finally annexed by Yuan. After that, Yuan started the war with Cao Cao. However, in this process, his army was finally defeated by Cao Cao. After Yuan's death, his three sons were also defeated by Cao's army for a few times. Two of them named Yuan Xi (?-207) and Yuan Shang (?-207) chose to turn to Ta Dun (?-207), the leader of Wuhuan.

That was the immediate cause of the Battle of White Wolf Mountain. Cao Cao's aim was to eliminate all the members of the Yuan family. Ta Dun had the ambition of controlling the north region of Han Empire. Inevitably, these two military groups (the Cao army and the Wuhuan cavalry) would have a decisive battle. Finally, this two armies met in White Wolf Mountain.

2.2 The introduction of Wuhuan

Wuhuan was a nomadic tribe lived near the northeast border of Eastern Han Dynasty (locating in today's north region of Inner Mongolia, Hebei Province and Liaoning Province, China). It started to become the vassal of Han Dynasty after Huo Qubing defeating Xiongnu ^[2]. Many years later, some people of Wuhuan were arranged to live in the territory of Han Dynasty because these nomads were good sources of mounted troops.

In late Eastern Han Dynasty, because of the chaotic situation, the people of Wuhuan betrayed their suzerain. Unfortunately, they met Gongsun Zan, one of the best cavalry commanders of that period's Han Dynasty. Finally, they had to follow Yuan Shao, the biggest warlord of north region of Eastern Han Dynasty.

As mentioned before, Yuan was defeated by Cao Cao. In this period, Wuhuan's virtual ruler was called Ta Dun. His people lived in some places of the three prefectures (Liaodong, Liaoxi and Right Beiping) of Youzhou area

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(including nine prefectures, locating in today's Beijing City, Liaoning Province, north region Hebei Province of China and the north-west region of North Korea). Therefore, his tribes were called Three Prefectures Wuhuan. His cousin named Lou Ban (?-207) was the nominal top leader of Wuhuan [2]. Thus, the Wuhuan cavalymen of Shanggu Prefectures (locating in today's Zhangjiakou City, Hebei Province, China) were also under the leadership of Ta Dun. The people of Three Prefectures Wuhuan chose Liu City (locating in today's Chaoyang County, Liaoning Province, China) as their political centre which finally became the aim of Cao Cao's army.

3 The Personnel of Cao's expeditionary army

3.1 Tiger and Leopard Cavalry

Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was an elite army of Cao Cao. After Yuan Shao's death, Cao started to fight against Yuan's three sons. Tiger and Leopard Cavalry appeared in this period. Its commander was called Cao Chun (170-210), a cousin of Cao Cao [1]. As a matter of fact, each top leaders of this army were from the Cao family. Cao Chun and his excellent cavalymen also took part in the Battle of White Wolf Mountain [1]. It presented that Cao Cao paid much attention to this battle.

According to *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (290), the best cavalymen would be chosen to serve in this army [1]. As a matter of fact, this army could be divided into two parts: Tiger Cavalry and Leopard Cavalry. Today, some official seals of Leopard Cavalry's commanders are kept in the Palace Museum, China [3]. One of them was shown in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. An official seal of Leopard Cavalry's commander (Source: adapted from *The official seals of Qin Dynasty, Han Dynasty and Northern and Southern Dynasties*) [3]

3.2 A reliable staff officer

Before started the expedition, Cao Cao and his officers held a meeting. Most of the officers were afraid that another warlord of that period named Liu Biao (142-208) would attack Cao's territory when they were fighting against Ta Dun. A staff officers named Guo Jia (170-207) insisted to attacked Ta Dun after analyzing their own situation [1]. Cao Cao accepted his advice, asking him to go with the army. Because Guo's thought about the expedition was the same as Cao's.

Guo Jia was a radical person, suggesting Cao Cao leading a few elite soldiers and attacking the political center of Wuhuan directly. This adventure was an important reason for the final victory.

3.3 Excellent warriors

In the Cao army, there were many officers who famous for bravery and fighting skill. Having a hunch that it would be a fierce battle, Cao chose five of them to go with the army. Except Cao Chun, other four generals named Zhang Liao (169-222), Xu Huang (?-227), Zhang He (?-231) and Zhang Xiu (?-207) were also Cao's favourite generals. Zhang Liao and Zhang He were appointed the commanders of the vanguard [1].

3.4 The former allies of the Yuan army

Cao's aim was to defeat Yuan Shao's two sons and the Wuhuan cavalry at the same time. In this situation, the information about the Yuan army and the Wuhuan cavalry was of great importance. Therefore, two generals named Yan Rou (?-?) and Xianyu Fu (?-?) were asked to go with the army. They used to be the allies of the Yuan army during the war between Yuan Shao and Gongsun Zan [1]. Therefore, they know much about its situation. What's more, Yan Rou used to live in the nomadic tribes for a long time, being familiar with the tactics of nomadic troops. They could act as the military advisers of Cao Cao.

3.5 A local official

Because the military action of attacking Wuhuan was an expedition, Cao needed to find a local person to act as his guide. Fortunately, he met Tian Chou (169-214), an official living in Youzhou area for many years. Because the soldiers of Wuhuan killed many local officials, Tian kept trying to find a chance to eliminate them [1]. The coming of the Cao army let him see the dawn. He finally helped Cao find a route to make a surprise attack on the Wuhuan cavalry.

4 The Strategy of Cao Cao

4.1 Consolidating territory

Cao Cao started the war with the remainder of the Yuan army after Yuan Shao's death. In 205, his soldiers killed Yuan Shao's eldest son named Yuan Tan (?-205) in the Battle of Nanpi [1][2]. In 206, Yuan Shao's nephew named Gao Gan (?-206) was killed when he was fleeing [2]. He turned to Xiongnu before his death [2]. The leaders of Xiongnu refused to support him. In this process, Yuan Shao's two other sons arrived in the territory of Ta Dun.

Cao Cao clearly knew that if he wanted to successfully annex the territory of Yuan Shao, he would have to eliminate the whole Yuan family. Otherwise, the remainder of the Yuan army who had surrendered would betray him at any time. What's worse, Yuan Shao kept a good relation with the leaders of Wuhuan when he was alive [1][2]. Without completely defeating the Wuhuan cavalry and killing Yuan's two sons, avenging the Yuan family would become a good reason for the leaders of Wuhuan to attack Cao Cao. If they fought with Yuan's remainder, it would be a really bad situation for the Cao

army.

What's worse, Many people from upper class were the friends of the Yuan family because Yuan Shao was born in a famous official family. The destroying of the whole Yuan family would help Cao gain the support from the upper class. Therefore, the expedition was a necessary military action. At the same time, the Cao army must get the final victory.

4.2 Associating with the distant regimes and attacking the near ones

Associating with the distant regimes and attacking the near ones was a stratagem created by Fan Ju (?-?), a famous politician and strategist of the Period of Warring States (475 B.C.-221 B.C.) [4]. Its concrete content is that the nations that border each other will become enemies while nations separated by distance and obstacles will make better allies [5]. When you are the strongest in one field, your greatest threat is from the second strongest in your field, not the strongest from another field [5].

In the situation of the early third century, Cao Cao needed to face such a situation. Liao Dong Prefecture (locating in today's southeast region of Jilin and Liaoning Provinces of China as well as the northwest region of North Korea) was occupied by Gongsun Du and his son named Gongsun Kang (?-?). Gongsun Du was an excellent commander, defeating the army of Wuhuan and Goguryeo (a regime built by the people from the Han nationality and Chinese minority nationality, locating in the north of the Korean Peninsula and a part of northeast China) [2]. Because of the chaotic situation of late Eastern Han Dynasty, Gongsun let Liaodong area become his independent kingdom. Since his territory was far from the Central Plains, the central government of Eastern Han Dynasty was not quite convenient to crusade him. After his death, Gongsun Kang became the new top leader of Liaodong area.

Cao's largest aim was to defeat the warlords in the Central Plains. Therefore, he couldn't let the Gongsun family become his potential threat. However, it is not quite convenient for him to crusade Gongsun directly because of the long distance. At the same time, Yuan's two sons and the Wuhuan cavalry were his biggest threat. If he could defeated them, the Gongsun family would quickly become from his potential threat to his ally because of the huge deterrent effect of his successful expedition.

4.3 Gaining resources of mounted troops

Practicing horsemanship and archery was the custom of Wuhuan [2]. Therefore, the young men of this nationality were good resources of mounted troops. The governors of Eastern Han Dynasty paid much attention to cavalry. Coming from the Han army, Cao Cao was greatly influenced by this military thought. In his military career, cavalry was an indispensable part. Therefore, finding good sources of mounted troops was necessary for him. After defeating the Wuhuan cavalry in the Battle of White Wolf Mountain, he incorporated this army. Under the leadership of him, the Three Prefectures Wuhuan cavalry became

very famous [1].

5 The Tactics of Cao Cao

5.1 The process of the Battle of White Wolf Mountain

In May 207, Cao Cao's army arrived in Wuzhong area (locating in today's Tianjin City, China) from Ye City (locating in today's Handan City, Hebei Province, China). However, the road was washed away by the flood [1]. At the same time, Tian Chou advised the army to march along the path. Then, Cao asked his soldiers to pretend to retreat. In order to cheat the Wuhuan cavalry, he put a wooden pillar beside the road, writing the words that he would start his military action in autumn or winter [1].

At the same time, some elite soldiers of the Cao army were marching along the path. Tian Chou acted as their guide. They were discovered by the Wuhuan Cavalry after arriving in White Wolf Mountain (locating in today's Inner Mongolia, China), about 200 li (100 km) from Liu City [1]. Ta Dun came to the battlefield with his tens of thousands of cavalymen. However, after seeing the formation of the Wuhuan Cavalry was chaotic, Cao asked Zhang Liao leading the cavalymen and charging the Wuhuan Cavalry. The cavalymen of Wuhuan were routed after a short time [1]. Ta Dun was captured by Tiger and Leopard cavalry [1]. Cao's soldiers killed him immediately. After Ta Dun's death, his people chose to surrender.

After the battle, when Yuan's two sons finally arriving in Liao Dong area, Gongsun Kang killed them and sent their head to Cao Cao [1][2].

5.2 The introduction of Tuji

In the Battle of White Wolf Mountain, the key of the Cao army's final victory was the charging of cavalry. In late Eastern Han Dynasty, charging had become a ripe cavalry tactic. In the whole battle, Cao totally used two cavalry tactics: long-range raid and charging. During the Chu-Han War (206-202 B.C.), the commander in chief of the Chu army named Xiang Yu (232-202 B.C.) found that it was of great use to make a combination of cavalry's motility and ability of charging [6]. In Western Han Dynasty, because of the war between Han Dynasty and Xiongnu, Xiang's tactic was widely used by the cavalry commanders of the Han army. Because of that, the government of Western Han Dynasty built a special army named Tuji, consisting of some heavy cavalymen who were good at using halberd and bow or crossbow (as shown in Figure 2). In order to keep cavalry's motility, their horses would not wearing armor. At the very beginning, this kind of heavy cavalry was called Tunji [7]. In Eastern Han Dynasty, in order to improve the ability of charging, many cavalymen started to use lance to take the place of halberd [8]. As a matter of fact, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry could also be seen as a kind of Tuji. Comparing with common heavy cavalymen, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry's soldiers were much more bold and powerful.



Fig. 2. A heavy cavalryman of Western Han Dynasty, holding a halberd (Source: adapted from *The weapons of ancient China*)^[9]

5.3 Cao Cao's cavalry tactic

From the process of the Battle of White Wolf Mountain, we can easily see that the Cao army's cavalymen were good at long-range raid. At the same time, their charging ability was of a high level. After reviewing their classical battles, we will find that they usually started attacking when their enemies' formation was chaotic. According to *Six Arts of War (the period of Warring states)*, there are fourteen situations that suitable for cavalry's attack. One of the situations is that if you see the formation of your enemy is chaotic, it will be a good time to attack^[10]. It requires the cavalry commander having considerable insight.

In the Battle of Nanpi, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry also defeated the army of Yuan Tan with charging tactic. However, it was another situation. Before Yuan's army finishing the formation, Yuan was killed by the soldiers of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry^[2]. According to *Six Arts of War*, when your enemy's formation is unfinished, you'd better start attacking as soon as possible^[10].

6 Conclusions

The Battle of White Wolf Mountain was a key battle in that period. After this battle, Cao Cao became the real governor of north Han Empire. In this battle, the cavalry of the Han nationality showed formidable battle efficiency. It was the result of the commanders' appropriate tactic and long-range strategy foresight. However, fundamentally, this military action was a adventure which require the commander in chef having enough courage. In this battle, Cao showed his extraordinary military talent. At the same time, this battle was the continuation of Cao and Yuan's political struggle. The Wuhuan cavalry was their political chip. As a matter of fact, in Chinese history, it was quite common that the nomads acted as the political chip of the politicians from the Han nationality. The Wuhuan cavalry was just a typical example.

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