

The Research on the Psychological Tactic of the Northern and Southern Dynasties

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Psychology's military use was discovered by ancient Chinese strategists in a very early time. In the Spring and Autumn period(770 B.C.-476 B.C.), psychological tactics were put into practice. After coming to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), psychological tactics had become the required course of strategists. Therefore, many generals of this period could use it adroitly. There were many classic examples which could help us analyze the psychological tactics of this era. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a few classic examples and summarize their characteristics. Then, we can better understand the psychological tactics of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

Keywords: psychological tactics, the Northern and Southern Dynasties, tactical side, strategic side

Introduction

The strategists of ancient China spent much time researching psychological tactics which made the masters of psychological tactics be too numerous to enumerate. In Chinese, there were many idioms about psychological tactics such as Po Fu Chen Zhou (translated as "burnt one's boats") and Wang Mei Zhi Ke (translated as "console oneself with false hopes"). As a matter of fact, ancient Chinese people used psychological tactics in a very early time. In the battle of Changshao (684 B.C.), Cao Gui (?-?), the commander of the Lu army defeated the Qi army with his psychological tactic (Zuo, 2016). It was a relatively early historical record of Chinese people defeating their enemies with psychological tactics. Then, a strategist named Sun Wu (545 B.C.-470 B.C.) put forward a concept "subduing the enemy without fighting" in his military work *The Art of War* (Sun, 2018). It was seen as the supreme state of psychological tactic by Chinese people.

In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, psychological tactics were widely used by those generals. During this period, wars happened frequently. Since the forces of two sides were unbalanced, it was quite hard for the underdog to defeat its enemy on the frontal battlefield. Therefore, strategies were of great importance. In these strategies, psychological tactic was the one that needed the lowest cost. Actually, unequal war was the necessary condition of psychological tactics' development. In the whole Northern and Southern Dynasties, the most excellent psychological tactics users appeared in the Second Three Kingdoms period (534-577) since the war intensified in this era. In this period, the Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577) and the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581) kept having wars. Since the Zhou army was weaker than the Qi army, the commanders of the Zhou army such as Wei Xiaokuan (509-580) had to spend time on psychological tactics which greatly promoted the development of psychological tactics.

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During the research, the largest difficulty I met was studying psychological tactics combining with information. For the ancients, the difficult point of using psychological tactics was to use information to break enemy's psychological barrier. In Chinese, this tactic was called Yong Jian (Sun, 2018). If a general wanted to be a master of Yong Jian, psychological knowledge would be necessary for him. For the researchers, untangling the complex web of information and psychological tactics was not an easy job.

In modern times, psychology is still of great importance in military field. However, in today's China, because of the rise of reverse nationalism, many people try their best to belittle the effect of tactic and strategy created by ancient Chinese generals. Of course, the psychological tactics of ancient China were misinterpreted maliciously. The target of this paper is to restore some of the psychological tactics in the Northern and Southern Dynasties through analyzing some generals and their battles. At the same time, I will also introduce some examples of other dynasties in order to explain these tactics clearly.

The Relation Between Psychological Tactic and Chinese Art of War

Before introducing the psychological tactics of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, it is necessary for us to know more about the relations between psychological tactics and Chinese art of war. As mentioned before, Chinese strategists noticed the importance of psychological tactics in a very early time. Sun Wu summarized the psychological tactics and recorded them in his military work *The Art of War*. After that, more and more Chinese generals started to do research about psychological tactics. Therefore, many masters of psychological tactics appeared in the history of China.

The generals of ancient China gave psychological tactic a special name Gong Xin, translated as making a psychological attack. Interestingly, the word Gong Xin first appeared in a history book named *Intrigues of the Warring States*, not a military book (Liu, 2015). Actually, when doing research about the military of ancient China, history books are of the same importance as military works.

Except Sun Wu, another strategist named Zhuge Liang (181-234) also thought highly of psychological tactic. In his opinion, making a psychological attack was better than attacking the enemy on the battlefield (Chen, 2019). By the way, Sun and Zhuge were thought to be two of the greatest strategists of ancient China. In Chinese, these top-level strategists were called Wumiao Shizhe, translated as 10 great strategists (Ouyang & Song, 1975). In Chinese military history, Jiang Shang (?-1050 B.C.) and Zhang Liang (?-186 B.C.) were the only two people who were higher in status than them.

According to *Hanshu*, the Chinese art of war could be divided into four groups: Bing Quanmou (strategy), Bing Xingshi (tactic and command), Bing Yinyang (the use of meteorology and geography), and Bing Jiqiao (the use of weapons and the training of soldiers) (Ban, 2007). Psychological tactic is a very important part of Bing Quanmou and Bing Jiqiao. In Chinese history, the examples of psychological tactic used on the battlefield were easy to find. For example, the battle of Julu (208 B.C.-207 B.C.) is a very famous instance of using psychological tactic to get the final victory. Xiang Yu (232 B.C.-202 B.C.), the commander of Chu army, was the representative figure of Bing Xingshi. When facing the powerful Qin army, Xiang asked his soldiers to destroy all the boats (using to escape) and pots (using to cook) (Sima, 1982). Having no chance to retreat, the soldiers of the Chu army had to defeat the Qin army in a short time. It was a famous example of using psychological tactic on the frontal battlefield. However, if combines psychological tactic with strategy, it will become much more difficult. Since the commanders of this situation are required to have a great vision. Wei

Xiaokuan, a strategist of the Northern and Southern Dynasties I mentioned before, was a commander like that. I will introduce his deed in this paper.

The Typical Psychological Tactics of the Northern and Southern Dynasties on the Tactical Side

Showing the Courage of the Commanders

History background. In ancient times, the generals personally fighting in the battles would greatly inspire the troops. This way was useful in all the wars in era of cold weapon. Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties were in trouble times, many brave generals appeared in this period. Many of the Northern and Southern Dynasties' generals were not only brave enough but also highly skilled in military drill. Therefore, in this era, even the single combats were really common.

Besides, in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the wars happened frequently which caused many soldiers' unstable mentality, since most of the people were afraid of death. In this situation, inspiring the troops was of great importance. If the troops suffered from low morale, a failure would be inevitable.

The classic battle of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The experience of a famous general named Gao Ang (501-538) was a typical example of this tactic.

Gao was the most skillful lance user at that time and many people compared him to Xiang Yu (the commander of the battle of Julu, being famous for his combat skill) (Li, 1974). He used to be the leader of an uprising army and fought against the Northern Wei army led by Erzhu Yusheng (?-531). Erzhu stormed the city of Gao. Without preparation, Gao had to rush out of the city with less than 20 cavalymen (Li, 1972). However, being shocked by his courage, Erzhu's soldiers did not dare to fight against him and retreated immediately (Li, 1972).

The analysis of the battle. The result of Gao's battle was the ideal state of this tactic. The general's courage quickly broke the psychological defense of enemy's troops and the loss of his own side was minimized. This advantage attracted many generals to doing such behavior. Many famous generals of the Northern and Southern Dynasties such as Cai You (506-559), Xiao Mohe (532-604), and Hulv Guang (515-572) had such kind of deed.

Except inspiring the troops, showing the courage of generals could enhance their prestige. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, military construction was the most important thing of every regime. Therefore, the soldiers of that period were much more militant than in peace time. Valiant generals were really popular in the army.

However, the risk-taking behavior of general was usually not a good way. If the commander was killed on the battlefield, the morale of his troops would become lower. However, many generals still found pleasure in it. Until the improvement of crossbows and the invention of hot weapon, such behavior became more and more dangerous, many Chinese generals had to give up their shows.

Cutting off All Means of Retreat

Applicable conditions. As mentioned before, in the battle of Julu, Xiang Yu cut off all means of retreat which made his soldiers fight bravely and get the final victory. It was a good way to improve fighting capacity temporarily. However, using such a tactic is a great adventure. If the army itself is suffering from low morale, using this tactic will lead to a worse result. Therefore, the premise of using this tactic is that the army is well-trained and of high morale.

However, there is another situation that is suitable for this tactic. When your soldiers hate their enemies deeply, such a psychological tactic will be useful. In Chinese history, there were many famous examples. Here I have to mention Xiang Yu and the battle of Julu again. In the late Warring States, the state of Chu was destroyed by the state of Qin. That's why Xiang could use the tactic of cutting off all means of retreat successfully. He himself and his soldiers' motherland was the state of Chu.

The classic battle of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. In 529, one of the most important wars of China was the Northern Expedition of Chen Qingzhi (484-539), a famous general of the Liang Dynasty (502-557). Chen's army stormed the Northern Wei Dynasty and occupied its capital in a few months. For the Liang Dynasty (Chen's country), it was a successful speculation. Because when Chen started his military action, the elite army of the Northern Wei Dynasty kept fighting against the uprising army, having no chance to resist Chen's attack.

In this process, the most famous battle was the battle of Xingyang. When Chen's army was attacking Xingyang City, the elite cavalry of the Northern Wei Dynasty led by Yuan Tianmu (489-530) had defeated the uprising army and started to rush to Xingyang City (Yao, 1973). Chen clearly knew that his army could not defeat Yuan's cavalry without relying on the city wall. Therefore, his army must occupy Xingyang City as soon as possible. After understanding the situation, he made a speech in front of his soldiers. He told them that they had no choice except occupying Xingyang City (Yao, 1973). Since these soldiers of the Liang army kept plundering after coming to the Northern Wei Dynasty's territory (Yao, 1973). More importantly, because of the continuous war and ethnic hatred (Chen soldiers were from the Han nationality and Yuan's soldiers were from the Sumbe nationality), Chen's soldiers hated the Northern Wei Dynasty deeply. Finally, Chen's army successfully occupied Xingyang City before Yuan's cavalry arrived.

The analysis of the battle. As a matter of fact, compared with Xiang Yu, Chen Qingzhi's tactic was not so excellent. Because Xiang created the situation of being cut off all means of retreat spontaneously while Chen was in such a pickle passively. Chen's shining point was that he could quickly understand the situation and choose a correct psychological tactic. Besides, he knew his army very well. That's why he could decide to use this psychological tactic without hesitation.

How to defeat an army who uses such a tactic. It is hard to defeat the soldiers whose way of retreat is cut off. However, cutting off all means of retreat is not always useful. In the late Tang Dynasty (618-907), a warlord named Yang Xingmi (852-905) told us how to defeat such an army with his wisdom. When facing such an army of Sun Ru (?-892), Yang clearly knew that he should not resist it on the frontal battlefield. He chose to keep harassing Sun's army (Ouyang, 1974). Finally, famine and plague happened in Sun's army at the same time (Ouyang, 1974). Yang's army won the victory easily.

From Sun and Yang's example, we can find that the tactic of cutting off all means of retreat is limited by time. If you use such a tactic but cannot defeat your enemy in a very short time, a fatal failure is unavoidable. Therefore, unless you have no choice, don't rashly use this tactic. When facing such an army, an excellent commander will not face it on the frontal battle. If you keep avoiding and harassing it, it will finally be defeated by famine. Because humans are not machines, no matter how high their morale is, it is temporary.

The Stratagem of the Empty City

Applicable conditions. When facing a cautious person, stratagem of the empty city is a very useful tactic. It was a classic tactic of ancient China. In a military work named *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, the way of using this

tactic is introduced in detail. When the enemy is superior in numbers and your situation is such that you expect to be overrun at any moment, then drop all pretense of military preparation, act calmly, and taunt the enemy, so that the enemy will think you have a huge ambush hidden for them (In Depth Military Editorial Board, 2019). This tactic is really useful when facing cautious commanders. However, when facing those reckless commanders, it will become useless. Therefore, before using this tactic, you need to know much about your enemy. It exemplified a traditional Chinese military theory: if you know the enemy and yourself clearly, you don't need to fear about the result of a hundred battles (Sun, 2018).

The classic battle of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. In the battle of Mangshan Mountain (543), general Wang Sizheng (?-?) was asked to guard Huannong City, the granary of the Western Wei Dynasty (535-556). In the frontal battle, the army of the Western Wei Dynasty was defeated and the Eastern Wei army led by Liu Feng (?-549) started to rush to Huannong City, trying to destroy the granary of the Western Wei Dynasty. After knowing it, Wang asked the soldiers to open the city gate (Sima, 2011). Then, he himself lay on the city wall leisurely (Sima, 2011). Liu believed that there were ambushes in the city. He did not dare to fight and retreated immediately.

The analysis of the battle. Wang and Liu were famous generals of both sides. They knew each other clearly. By the way, six years later, Liu was killed by Wang's army. In the battle of Mangshan Mountain, Wang made full use of Liu's caution. He knew that his enemy would not attack rashly. Actually, in Chinese history, when the city gate is open, maybe there are ambushes in the city. It is a law of ancient Chinese military history. Stratagem of the empty city is a tactic that does the opposite. This tactic is usually used when retreat.

Reversing the stratagem of the empty city. The stratagem of the empty city requires the commander to pretend that his army is powerful. However, this tactic has a variant. When your army is powerful enough, you can pretend that your army is weak and lure your enemy into the encirclement.

In the Northern Qi Dynasty, an official named Zu Ting (?-?) was asked to defend Northern Xuzhou City. Before the uprising army came, he asked the soldiers to open the gate, pretending that the Northern Qi army had given up the city (Li, 1972). After the soldiers of uprising army seeing the scene, they believed that Zu was afraid of them and let their guard down. At the same time, the army led by Zu rushed out from the city. After a series of fierce battles, the uprising army had to give up attacking Northern Xuzhou City.

This battle was also a famous example of the stratagem of the empty city. Compared with the traditional one (a real empty city), the difference of Zu's tactic was that he created a fake empty city. From Zu's experience, we can summarize that the mode of the stratagem of the empty city is flexible which means we need to use it following the situation on the battlefield. Actually, Zu knew that the commanders of the uprising army were not experienced enough. Such kind of commanders always thought that their enemy was afraid of them. That's why Zu could use this tactic successfully. However, the uprising army was superior in numbers and Zu's army could not eliminate it.

The Psychological Tactics on the Strategic Side

The Introduction of Killing Someone With a Borrowed Knife

The essence of the psychological tactics on the strategic side is letting your enemy make the wrong decision. In *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, there are many psychological tactics. Killing someone with a borrowed knife is the most common and most useful one. That's why I want to focus on this tactic. The book introduces

this tactic in detail: when you do not have the means to attack your enemy directly, then attack using the strength of another (In Depth Military Editorial Board, 2019). Trick an ally into attacking him, bribe an official to turn traitor, or use the enemy's own strength against him (In Depth Military Editorial Board, 2019). In Chinese history, the examples of this tactic were countless. As time goes on, this tactic keeps developing and appears in many different forms. I will introduce two of them and analyze them with classic battles.

When you decide to use such a tactic, you need to make sure that your aim is the leader or important people of your enemy. In this situation, you need to make full use of your enemy's inner contradictions.

Driving a Tiger to Swallow a Wolf

The introduction of driving a tiger to swallow a wolf. Sometimes you may face more than one enemy at the same time. In this situation, killing an enemy with a borrowed knife is a good choice. You can drive a wedge between your enemies. In special circumstances, this tactic has a special name: driving a tiger (an enemy) to swallow a wolf (another enemy).

Compared with killing someone with a borrowed knife, driving a tiger to swallow a wolf is a tactic with a higher level. We can call it killing someone with a borrowed knife 2.0, because this tactic is much more dangerous for the user. From the name of this tactic, we can easily see the warning from ancient Chinese people. Both tiger and wolf are fierce animals. However, tiger is much more powerful which means it is much harder to control compared with wolf. This tactic may make the situation be out of control.

When using this tactic, the most important step is to find a bait. Without the bait, you cannot drive the tiger successfully. Usually, in human society, power and wealth are good baits. When the temptation is big enough, it is possible for you to control the tiger. Sometimes, the wolf itself is the bait. In this situation, you just need to let the tiger see the wolf as its food. In a word, you need to make full use of human's greed.

By the way, though this tactic was used in a very early time, the name driving a tiger to swallow a wolf appeared very late. In the early Ming Dynasty (the 14th century), this name first appeared in a famous novel named *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Luo, 2005).

The classic battle of driving a tiger to swallow a wolf. As mentioned before, the Northern Expedition of Chen Qingzhi was a very important event of that period. When analyzing it from the strategic side, it is a good example of driving a tiger to swallow a wolf.

In 528, a Northern Wei Dynasty's imperial kinsman named Yuan Hao (494-529) surrendered to the Liang Dynasty. The emperor of the Liang Dynasty encouraged him to go back to the Northern Wei Dynasty and usurp the throne (Li, 1974). Chen Qingzhi and his 7,000 soldiers were asked to protect Yuan. Then, Chen and Yuan started their northern expedition. On the way to Luoyang (the capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty), Yuan kept recruiting soldiers and refugees into his army. After many fierce battles, they finally arrived in Luoyang. At that time, there were about one hundred thousand soldiers in Yuan's army.

Finally, because of the contradiction between Yuan and Chen, their army was defeated by Erzhu Rong (493-530), the supreme commander of the Northern Wei army. Yuan was finally killed. Chen had to flee back to the Liang Dynasty by himself.

The analysis of the battle. For the Liang Dynasty, though the Northern Expedition finally failed, the goal of weakening the Northern Wei was achieved. Actually, it was impossible for the Liang Dynasty to totally defeat its enemy because of the strength gap. If the Northern Wei Dynasty could be weakened largely, it would be good news for the Liang Dynasty. That is the real purpose of the Liang Dynasty's governor.

In this process, Yuan Hao acted as the tiger and the emperor of the Northern Wei Dynasty acted as the wolf. The throne was the bait.

In this process, the only cost of the Liang Dynasty was Chen Qingzhi's 7,000 soldiers. Since the war happened in the territory of the Northern Wei Dynasty and the main force of both sides was the soldiers and refugees of the Northern Wei Dynasty. Because Chen needed to preserve his strength, his 7,000 soldiers always acted as shock brigade. The government of the Liang Dynasty did not offer food to Chen's 7,000 soldiers. Therefore, they had to plunder in the territory of the Northern Wei Dynasty. It also led to the financial loss of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

In a word, compared with the Northern Wei Dynasty, the loss of the Liang Dynasty was very little. The strength gap between these two regimes narrowed considerably.

Killing Someone With a Borrowed Knife Combing With Propaganda

The introduction of killing someone with a borrowed knife combing with propaganda. Usually, if you want to use the tactic of killing someone with a borrowed knife, you need to make full use of propaganda or rumor. In Chinese history, propaganda was also a very important part of the psychological tactics on the strategic side. The most famous example was that many uprisings usually started with the spread of some strange ballads. For example, before the uprising at the end of Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), many people started to hear a strange song: a stone man only has one eye will bring the uprising along the Yellow River (Song, 1976). After that, a stone man was dug out and the uprising started, because many people believed that uprising was the will of heaven. In ancient times, it was a strong mind trick.

Also in Chinese history, when some strange songs about a general appeared, it usually signified that he had become the aim of the tactic (killing someone with a borrowed knife). In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, similar things happened many times. Using the rumour to destroy the relationship between emperor and general is a common tactic in ancient China. Then, the emperor might become the knife.

The classic battle of killing someone with a borrowed knife combing with propaganda. In the middle of the 6th century, the Northern Qi Dynasty and Northern Zhou Dynasty had a continual confrontation. In that period, the national defense of the Northern Qi Dynasty was in the charge of Hulv Guang (515-572), the most famous general of the Northern Qi Dynasty.

In order to crush Qi army's morale, Wei Xiaokuan, the master spy of the Northern Zhou Dynasty started his plan of killing Hulv Guang. From the spies he sent to the Northern Qi Dynasty, Wei knew that many officials of the Northern Qi Dynasty hated Hulv Guang deeply (Xiong & Chu, 2016). Zu Ting (the official reversed the stratagem of the empty city) was one of them. It was him that let Wei use the tactic successfully (Linghu, 1971).

Wei prepared many leaflets with the hint (two poems) that Hulv would become emperor. Then his spies brought them to Yecheng City (the capital of the Northern Qi Dynasty). Zu got a leaflet accidentally and added some words (Linghu, 1971). Then, he brought it to the emperor. Finally, the emperor chose to believe in Zu and killed Hulv Guang immediately.

The analysis of the battle. In Chinese, Wei's action was called Yong Jian. His psychological tactic was based on the information he got. He made full use of the internal contradictions of the Northern Qi Dynasty. Firstly, those officials who hated Hulv Guang wanted a chance to frame him. Wei just gave them such an opportunity. More importantly, the emperor of the Northern Qi Dynasty was afraid of losing the throne. Hulv's

renown and military capability let him feel threatened. Wei understood his mentality and enlarged it with rumors in a suitable time. That's why Wei could succeed easily.

Until today, propaganda or rumour is still an important tool of many regimes. When combining with psychological tactics, it will become a powerful weapon.

Conclusion

Psychological tactic is a very important part of the art of war. From the examples of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, we can easily see that it was the weapon of wise men. Until today, the psychological tactic on the strategic side is still useful. In this relatively peaceful time, it becomes an important tactic in great nation gambling. The weapons of this tactic have changed from poems, songs and leaflets to movies, TV dramas, and the Internet. However, the essence has not changed. Compared with the whole field (the psychological tactic of the Northern and Southern Dynasties), the psychological tactic I introduce in this paper is only a drop of water in the sea. It is an invaluable asset that ancient Chinese people reserved for us.

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