

# The Research on the Battle of Yanmen Pass

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During the war between Liao Dynasty (907-1125) and Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), there was a classic battle that happened in Yanmen Pass (located in today's Dai County, Xinzhou, Shanxi Province, China). It was a well known battle of ancient China because a commander of the Song army named Yang Ye (?-986) was really famous in both classical Chinese fictions and Chinese war history. He is the early protagonist of a famous Chinese classic fiction named *The Romance of the Yang family's generals* (written in the 16th century, Ming Dynasty of China). The story of his family also appears in other novels. Besides, in history, he was a general who was active in the early stages of the war between Liao Dynasty and Northern Song Dynasty. The battle of Yanmen Pass (980) was one of the most important battles of Yang's military career. His combat style especially his cavalry tactic can be summarized through researching this battle.

**Keywords:** Northern Song Dynasty, Yanmen Pass, Yang Ye, Liao Dynasty, cavalry tactic

## Introduction

The battle of Yanmen Pass happened in 980 was a classic battle of defence counterattack with cavalry which was quite different from the common use of early Song Dynasty's cavalry. After surrendering to Song Dynasty, Yang Ye experienced two important battles. The battle of Yanmen Pass was the first. The last one was called Yongxi's northern expedition (986). Because of the incorrect strategy, the Song army experienced a debacle. Yang became one of the victims unfortunately. Because of the strong tragic colors of Yongxi's northern expedition, Xiong Damu (1506-1578), the writer of *The Romance of the Yang family's generals* spent a large amount of pen and ink describing the process of Yang Ye's sacrifice, letting it become a classic plot (Xiong, 2011). However, the battle of Yanmen Pass was ignored by Xiong.

*The Romance of the Yang family's generals* was written in the period of Jiajing Emperor's (1507-1567) rule. In this period, there were many battles between the Ming army and the Mongol cavalry. Unlike early Ming Dynasty, in this period, the Ming army was on the defensive. Maybe dissatisfied with this situation, Xiong written *The Romance of the Yang family's generals*, telling a story about the generals of the Han nationality defeating the nomads.

For the researcher of Chinese war history, if you want to study Yang Ye and Northern Song's Yang family, you will find that the research about the battle of Yanmen Pass is one of the most important parts. It showed the unique cavalry tactic of Yang Ye which was quite different from that of other generals of the Song army. As a matter of fact the military career of the Yang family worth using a whole book to introduce. However, at present,

most of the Chinese people just see the Yang family as literature images. Because of that, the research about the Yang family's general from the angle of war history is really rare. The aim of this paper is to research one of the most important battles of the Yang family's military career, trying to restore Yang Ye's real image in Chinese war history. As mentioned before, Yang's cavalry tactic was different from the main stream of the Song army. I will try to find out the reason through reviewing the whole military career of him. Yang's biography recorded in *The history of Song Dynasty* (written in 1345) will be the main material of this research.

### **Historical Background**

During the period of Zhao Jiong (939-997), the second emperor of Northern Song Dynasty, the Song army totally conducted two strategic offensives. The first one was called the battle of Gaoliang River (979). The second one was called Yongxi's northern expedition (986). The Song army failed in these two battles. Between 979 and 986, there were a series of miniature battles between Liao and Song Dynasties (Wu, 2016; Taiwan Military University, 2013). During this period, the Song army was on the defensive and got many victories. The battle of Yanmen was one of these victories.

### **The Process of the Battle of Yanmen Pass**

In March 980, one hundred thousand soldiers led by Xiao Duoli (?-980) and Li Chonghui (946-1013) started to attack Yanmen Pass (Wu, 2016; Li, 2018; Taiwan Military University, 2013). At the same time, there were only several thousand soldiers whose commander was Yang Ye garrisoning at Yanmen Pass. After knowing the situation, Yang and his cavalymen circled to the enemy's rear (Wu, 2016; Tuotuo, 2000; Taiwan Military University, 2013). After a surprise attack, the Liao army was defeated by these cavalymen (Wu, 2016; Tuotuo, 2000; Taiwan Military University, 2013). After the battle, the Liao army would choose to retreat if they saw the army flag of Yang (Tuotuo, 2000).

About the quantity of Yang's cavalymen, the statements of ancient historians and modern historians were totally different. According to *The history of Song Dynasty*, there were a few thousand cavalymen in this military action (Tuotuo, 2000). However, many modern historians think that Yang defeated the Liao army just by leading a few hundred cavalymen (Wu, 2016; Taiwan Military University, 2013). As a matter of fact, the statement of modern historians is much more believable. Because the army of Yanmen Pass was garrison troop. It is impossible that all of the soldiers were cavalymen. Therefore, the statement of a few hundred cavalymen is more believable. From this example, we can also see that the combat effectiveness of early Song Dynasty's cavalry was really high.

### **The Cavalry Tactic of Yang Ye**

As mentioned before, the cavalry tactic of Yang Ye was totally different from that of other generals of the Song army. The main stream cavalry tactic of early Song army inherited from the Five Dynasties and Ten States Period (907-979). In this period, heavy cavalry was the main stream. These cavalymen usually started attack under cover of infantry, opening the defense from the flank of their enemy. It was a typical tactic of the Han nationality's cavalry when facing the formation of heavy infantry. In this situation, both the cavalryman and the horse would wear heavy armor. It was a tactic which was useful for positional warfare.

However, Yang's cavalry tactic was totally different. From the historical records, we can easily see that Yang's tactic was a kind of light cavalry tactic. As a matter of fact, this tactic was another combat system of the Han Nationality's cavalry which was called the tactic of long-range raid, always being seen as a kind of mobile warfare. In this situation, the cavalymen would start a surprise attack after a long march. This tactic was created by a famous strategist named Xiang Yu (232-202 B.C.) during the battle of Pengcheng (205 B.C.) (Li, 2013, pp. 8-10). In Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-8 A.D.), this tactic was proved being useful when facing the nomads. In this situation, only the cavalryman would wear armor.

Before joining in the Song army, Yang was a general of Northern Han Dynasty (951-979), a regime located in today's Shanxi Province (Tuotuo, 2000). Interestingly, though Yang was usually seen as a general and spiritual symbol of the Han Nationality, he fought for the regime built by the nomads for a long time. Because Northern Han Dynasty was built by the people of Shatuo, a nomadic tribe. After surrendering to Song Dynasty, the Yang family returned the regime of the Han Nationality formally.

Liao Dynasty was the neighbouring country of Northern Han Dynasty. Therefore, Yang spent most of his military career in Northern Han Dynasty fighting against the Liao army. That's why he familiarized the cavalry tactic which was useful when facing the nomads.

### **Who was the Number one Hero of the Battle of Yanmen Pass?**

As a matter of fact, during the battle of Yanmen Pass, the commander in chief of that area's Song army was called Pan Mei (925-991). In *The Romance of the Yang family's generals*, the contradiction between the Pan family and the Yang family is one of the most important plots. As a matter of fact, this plot has its own historical prototype.

During the battle of Yanmen Pass, Xiao Duoli, the commander in chief of the Liao army was killed by the Song army (Tuotuo, 2000). Li Chonghui, the assistant of Xiao was captured (Tuotuo, 2000). According to *The history of Song Dynasty*, Li worked for the Song Dynasty in the latter part of his life (Xiong, 2011). His biography was also recorded in *The history of Song Dynasty* (Tuotuo, 2000). In the biography of Li Chonghui and Zhao Jiong, killing Xiao Duoli and capturing Li Chonghui were seen as the contributions of Pan Mei (Tuotuo, 2000). However, according to *Continuation of a general reflection for political administration* (written from 1143 to 1183) and *Major events of the history of Liao Dynasty* (written in the 1880s), these were the contributions of Yang Ye (Li, 2018; Li, 1979). The statement that Yang was the number one hero of the battle of Yan Men pass is accepted by the historians of modern China (Wu, 2016; Taiwan Military University, 2013).

During the battle of Yanmen Pass, the military action of Yang was confirmable. He and his cavalry marched to the rear of the Liao army and made a surprise attack (Tuotuo, 2000; Li, 1979). However, the behavior of Pan was controversial. According to his own statement recorded in *Continuation of a general reflection for political administration*, he asked Yang to make a surprise attack (Li, 1979). At the same time, his own army also fought against the Liao army (Li, 1979). However, there was another statement that Yang killed Xiao and captured Li on his own (Li, 2018; Bi, 1957). This statement is accepted by many modern historians of China (Wu, 2016, Taiwan Military University, 2013).

There was an important detail which will help us restore the whole event. As mentioned before, after the battle, the Liao army would choose to retreat if they saw the army flag of Yang (Tuotuo, 2000). The behavior of

the Liao army showed that it was Yang's army that would let them scare. Therefore, who was the number one hero of this battle is very clear.

After the battle, Yang started to be framed by many generals of frontier guards (Li, 2018; Bi, 1957). Fortunately, the emperor did not believe them (Li, 2018; Bi, 1957). It was the historical prototype of the plot of *The Romance of the Yang family's generals*.

### Conclusion

During the battle of Yanmen Pass, Yang Ye's cavalry tactic was proved to be a suitable one when facing the Khitan cavalry. It was a pity that his tactic was not popularized by the Song army. At the same time, from the behavior of other generals of the Song army, we can easily see the chaos of early Song Dynasty's military. The commanders just thought about power struggle, ignoring the importance of military construction. This situation is also can be seen in modern society. *The Romance of the Yang family's generals* let the Yang family become famous in China. Though this battle does not appear in the fiction, it is still worth being researched in detail. Because it will help us restore the history of the Yang family's generals.

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