

Schemers, Private Armed Forces, and Confederates: A Study in Political History

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Schemers are not uncommon throughout the history of numerous countries. Stereotypically, the schemers would maintain private armed forces and recruit confederates to advance conspiracies and consolidate power. But, numerous historical events have proven that this stereotype holds a certain degree of validity. In times of chaos, warlord separatism made the phenomenon of maintaining private armies and recruiting confederates far more common than in peacetime. However, schemers will not just appear in times of chaos, which means they may also appear in peacetime. During peaceful periods, conspiracies to raise private armed forces and recruit confederates are more clandestine and less easily perceived. It is clear that across all nations globally, the presence of schemers represents a grave threat. At the same time, drawing on historical precedents, private armed forces and confederates are often the most terrifying weapons in the hands of schemers. For this reason, in history, their concurrent appearance frequently signified the onset of enormous political disaster. Nevertheless, such conspiracies are not without countermeasures.

Keywords: private armed forces, schemers, confederates, conspiracies, political history

Introduction

In history, the phenomena of keeping private armies and recruiting confederates have never been rare. For example, when reading the historical records about the late Eastern Han Dynasty of ancient China (184-220), you may see the related records of some special troops such as Tiger and Leopard Cavalry, White Horse Loyal Companions, and Heavy Halberd Infantry (Chen & Pei, 2006). These troops shared a common identity: the private armed forces of the warlords. At the same time, the commanders of these troops were usually the trusted followers of the warlords. As a matter of fact, in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, beyond warlords, many large landowners also owned private armed forces. During the late Eastern Han Dynasty, private armed forces could be divided into three types: kinship military forces, servant soldiers, and loyal companions (Guo, 2006). From the experiences of many warlords, we can see that kinship military forces and servant soldiers were of great importance during the early period of their military careers (Chen & Pei, 2006).

The late Eastern Han Dynasty was the first era of warlord separatism in China. In this period, the central

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government of the Eastern Han Dynasty gradually lost its grip on local administrations. An important reason for the appearance of this phenomenon was that the warlords and large landowners of this period successfully built their own military systems through their private armed forces and trusted followers. This directly resulted in the political pattern of opposition between the central government and local authorities in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. The aforementioned facts indicate that the presence of private armed forces had a profound impact on regional political structures. Similar cases were not unique in the history of China. For example, in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), after the An-Shi Rebellion (755-763), after surrendering to the Tang army, some rebel generals, together with their troops, were settled in the Hebei region and appointed as local military and administrative governors (Ouyang & Song, 2000). One of these generals, named Tian Chengsi (705-779) chose ten thousand elite soldiers and built a private army named *Yabing*, serving as his bodyguards (Liu, 2000). This behavior was immediately imitated by many local military and administrative governors. This event symbolized that China had entered another era of warlord separatism. As time went by, these private armed forces gradually transformed from the warlords' bodyguards into instruments for the warlords to seize power and annex one another (Wang, 1987).

In a word, it is clear that the existence of private armed forces and confederates will greatly influence local administrations. In other words, schemers at the local level may set up separatist regimes relying on their private armed forces and confederates. However, schemers will not just exist at the local level. How will the other schemers leverage private armed forces and confederates? As a matter of fact, what happened in history has provided the answer to this question. But, at present, studies on the relations among schemers, confederates, and private armed forces are relatively rare.

The aim of this paper is to carry out in-depth research on the relations among schemers, private armed forces, and confederates, based on the analysis of some different historical events. After that, we will find how the schemers leverage private armed forces and confederates to advance their conspiracies.

Private Armed Forces: A Weapon of Schemers

In the history of medieval China, who is the most famous schemer? This question has a certain answer: Sima Yi (179-251). In 249, he launched a coup and killed Cao Shuang (?-249), his largest political opponent, finally controlling the political circle of the Wei Kingdom (220-265) (Chen & Pei, 2006; Fang, 2014). This is the famous Gaoping Mausoleum Incident in medieval Chinese history.

Why could Sima Yi launch this coup and defeat the political group of Cao? Three main reasons are as follows.

1. Before the coup, Sima had feigned sickness for a long time, letting Cao believe that he did not have any ambition (Fang, 2014).
2. The Sima clan secretly kept a private armed force consisting of three thousand elite soldiers (Fang, 2014). During the coup, this little army quickly occupied the arsenal of Luoyang (located in today's Luoyang, Henan Province, China), the capital of the Wei Kingdom, seizing rapid command of the situation (Chen & Pei, 2006).
3. Sima dispatched some highly respected veteran officials to persuade Cao to give up resistance (Chen & Pei, 2006). At the same time, he solemnly swore that Cao would be granted amnesty (Chen & Pei, 2006). Because Sima was a veteran minister of the Wei Kingdom, Cao finally believed his commitment (Chen & Pei, 2006). Nevertheless, after surrendering, Cao and most of his followers were put to death (Chen & Pei, 2006).

Here, the readers may notice that Sima totally had two weapons: deception and private armed forces. As a

matter of fact, in history, many schemers would rely on these two weapons during the process of advancing their conspiracies. In addition, if they want to control the political circle, they will need to break the orderly status of it. In this process, private armed forces are their military backing.

By the way, for the 3rd and 4th centuries' northern China, the Sima clan controlling the political circle symbolized a dark era was looming. Because Sima Yi had undermined the credit system of the political arena during the Gaoping Mausoleum Incident, in the Western Jin Dynasty (265-316) later founded by the Sima clan, intrigues, political assassinations, and civil wars pervaded the entire dynasty. Prolonged civil wars reduced the Western Jin Dynasty's military power, and in turn precipitated the devastating military disaster of northern nomadic tribes pouring into the Central Plains.

The examples of schemers adopting armed forces to seize power can also be found in the history of the Korean Peninsula.

In the 12th century's Korean Peninsula, dissatisfied with the inferior treatment, some military officials of Goryeo (918-1392) launched a coup in 1170 (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010). After this coup, military officials held actual power over Goryeo, and the king was completely reduced to a figurehead (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010). After that, some military officials, such as Chǒng Chung-bu (1106-1179), Yi Ŭi-bang (?-1175), and Yi Ko (?-1171), built a collective leadership system (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010). This event marked the beginning of the Military Junta period (1170-1270) in Goryeo. Because many of these military officials were ambitious conspirators, before 1196, there appeared many political struggles and political assassinations in the political circle of Goryeo (Chǒng, 2013).

In 1196, the rules of Goryeo's political game were changed again. In this year, Yi Ŭi-min (?-1196), one of the most powerful military officials of Goryeo, was assassinated by a military official named Ch'oe Ch'ung-hǒn (1149-1219) (Chǒng, 2013). Before long, another influential military official named Tu Kyǒng-sǔng (?-1197) was exiled (Chǒng, 2013). In this process, many other officials were also killed or persecuted by the group of Ch'oe (Chǒng, 2013). After that, Ch'oe totally controlled the political circle of Goryeo and established an authoritarian regime.

Here, the readers may notice that the regime of Ch'oe was totally different from the ones established by previous military officials. Instead of keeping the collective leadership system, Ch'oe established an authoritarian regime. According to the statements of modern Korean historians, the reason that Ch'oe could establish an authoritarian regime was that he built private armed forces (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010). In other words, private armed forces were the most powerful backing of Ch'oe's authoritarian regime (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010).

Ch'oe's private armed forces were similar to the servant soldiers of ancient Chinese large landowners during the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Many soldiers of Ch'oe's private armed forces were his household slaves (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010). Because most elite soldiers were selected into the private armed forces of the Ch'oe clan, the government army stationed in the Goryeo capital consisted of infirm and enfeebled men (Chǒng, 2013). During the sixty-year rule of four generations of the Ch'oe clan, the clan's private armed forces were expanded a few times, and an elite cavalry unit was also established to maintain its military superiority, so that its authoritarian regime could be consolidated (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010).

As a matter of fact, the rule of the Ch'oe clan did not let the situation of Goryeo become better. In this period,

Goryeo's official recruitment system existed in name only, which directly led to the prolonged disorder of Goryeo's political circle (Lee, 2015). At the same time, unable to better the livelihood of the populace, the Ch'oe clan failed to consolidate popular support, which further weakened its rule (Research Institute for Korean History, Korea University, 2010). These phenomena arose because the four successive leaders of the Ch'oe clan devoted themselves exclusively to entrenching their autocratic rule, paying scant attention to economic development and social governance.

By the way, the Ch'oe clan, which originated from military officials, also showed mediocre performance in military affairs. In the 1210s, during the Khitan invasion, Ch'oe Ch'ung-hŏn demonstrated a very low level of tactical competence (Chŏng, 2013). After the war, he marginalized meritorious officials because of his jealousy (Chŏng, 2013). In the early 1230s, Goryeo experienced a series of military disasters, suffering heavy losses in the wars of resistance against the Mongol invasions (Chŏng, 2013). In this process, the Ch'oe clan could not repel the Mongol forces and had to relocate the capital together with the Goryeo royal family (Chŏng, 2013).

From these examples, the readers may easily notice that private armed forces usually served as the military backing of schemers when they were seizing power. After they seized power, such forces were frequently employed to eliminate political opponents and entrench authoritarian rule.

Barbarian Troops: A Special Category of Private Armed Forces

Throughout global history, it was not uncommon for those large empires to incorporate barbarian soldiers into their military forces. For example, during the Second Punic War (218-202 BC), the Numidians, a nomadic people of North Africa, served as cavalymen for the two warring sides, Rome and Carthage (Miles, 2016; Abbot, 2017). Besides Numidian cavalymen, there also existed some other barbarian soldiers in the army of Carthage, such as the slingers from the Balearic Islands (Abbot, 2017). In the war history of ancient times, barbarian troops sometimes were seen as a supplement to regular troops.

However, in history, employing barbarian troops sometimes posed latent political risks. As a matter of fact, compared with common troops, barbarian troops might be more favored by schemers. This is because of the behavior pattern of most schemers.

From the examples of Sima Yi and Ch'oe Ch'ung-hŏn, it is clear that during the process of seizing power, most schemers would try to kill those officials with different political views. In addition, if they wanted to establish authoritarian regimes, sometimes they would also need to suppress the populace. Some soldiers from common troops might regret attacking the officials and the populace. But those barbarian troops would execute the schemers' orders without compromise, unless they could not pay sufficient remuneration, simply because barbarian troops were essentially a kind of mercenary troops.

In medieval Chinese history, a famous example of schemers making use of barbarian troops happened in the Western Jin Dynasty. In order to gain the support of nomadic tribes, letting their troops become his military backing, Wang Jun (252-314), a general of the Western Jin Dynasty, let two of his daughters be married to two chiefs of Xianbei (a northern nomadic ethnic group in ancient China and medieval China) separately (Fang, 2014). After that, with the assistance of Xianbei tribal forces, Wang's army joined the large-scale civil strife of the War of the Eight Princes (291-306). In 304, after occupying Yecheng (located in today's Handan, Hebei Province, China), the troops led by Wang Jun carried out widespread plunder within this city (Fang, 2014). According to the historical records in *The Book of Jin*, in the course of this turmoil, more than eight thousand women were abducted and killed by Xianbei tribal forces (Fang, 2014). After that, following Wang, Xianbei tribal forces took

part in many other campaigns (Fang, 2014). Wang employed Xianbei tribal forces to attack hostile forces, which greatly exacerbated the chaos in the late Western Jin Dynasty. In fact, the situation of the Western Jin Dynasty did not move toward peace even after the end of the War of the Eight Princes in 306. The history of medieval China was about to descend into a turbulent era even more chaotic than the Three Kingdoms period (220-280).

Shortly after the end of the War of the Eight Princes, Wang started to have the thought of establishing separatist rule and claiming the imperial title (Fang, 2014). In this process, many of his opponents were put to death by him (Fang, 2014).

Also in this period, due to some contradictions, the alliance between Wang and the Xianbei tribes gradually disintegrated, which let him finally lose his military superiority. Finally, in 314, Wang was killed by Shi Le (274-333), a general of the Former Zhao regime (304-329) (Fang, 2014).

From this example, the readers can easily see that by adopting two honey traps, Wang successfully let Xianbei tribal forces become his private armed forces. As a matter of fact, honey traps were commonly adopted by those schemers when they were trying to build private armed forces consisting of barbarian soldiers.

Also from this example, it is easy to notice that sometimes those schemers will collude with external forces during the process of seizing power, relying on outside strength to strike down their political opponents. This will undoubtedly bring enormous political or military disasters to a country. Thus, when facing this situation, the best method to defeat the schemers is breaking up the alliance between schemers and external forces.

Confederates: The Hidden Strength of Schemers

As mentioned before, private armed forces can offer military backing to schemers. If a schemer wants to advance their conspiracies, such as seizing power and establishing an authoritarian regime, can he or she just rely on violence? Of course, the answer is no. Thus, during the process of schemers advancing their conspiracies, they also need a kind of hidden strength: confederates. Compared with private armed forces, confederates can offer schemers assistance in various other aspects.

During the process of advancing their conspiracies, such as breaking the orderly status of society or seizing power, because these schemers need to conceal their ambitions, they can not finish every step by themselves. Thus, they usually have others carry out acts that violate laws, public order, and good morals. Sometimes, the schemers may not have enough power to advance their conspiracies. In this situation, they may also need to recruit individuals as their confederates.

The typical example of schemers leveraging confederates to advance their conspiracies can also be found in the political history of the Western Jin Dynasty. In 291, Jia Nanfeng (257-300), the empress of the Western Jin Dynasty, wanted to kill Yang Jun (?-291), the minister-regent of the Western Jin Dynasty, so that she could interfere in politics (Sima, 2007). But, Empress Jia did not have her own military backing to assist her in advancing her conspiracy. Thus, she chose to win over Sima Wei (271-291), an imperial clansman with a large army under his control (Sima, 2007). With the assistance of Sima and some other confederates, Empress Jia successfully killed Yang (Sima, 2007). In this process, many other senior officials and their families were also killed (Sima, 2007). After that, Sima was also killed in the same year after being leveraged (Sima, 2007). Finally, Empress Jia successfully controlled the political circle of the Western Jin Dynasty (Sima, 2007). The political massacre of Empress Jia was the beginning of the famous War of the Eight Princes, which signified that the political arena of the Western Jin Dynasty was about to descend into chaos.

As mentioned before, intrigues, political assassinations, and civil wars pervaded the entire Western Jin

Dynasty. The actions of Empress Jia greatly exacerbated this tendency. She controlled the political circle of the Western Jin Dynasty through political massacre, which sent a signal to the entire political arena: In the political circle of the Western Jin Dynasty, the people who were cruel enough would gain victory in political struggles. Then, in 300, Empress Jia was killed after a coup launched by an ambitious imperial kinsman named Sima Lun (?-301) and one of his confederates named Sun Xiu (?-301) (Sima, 2007). After that, more and more imperial clansmen and officials were involved in the fierce political struggles of the Western Jin Dynasty, which finally led to a large-scale civil war.

Then, let's think about an important question. How will schemers recruit individuals as their confederates? Also drawing on historical precedents, the methods adopted by those schemers are the exploitation of corrupt practices. As a matter of fact, monetary bribery is not the only form of corruption, for corruption in fact pursues a broad array of objects, including official positions, resources, opportunities, among others (Wang, 1990). In a word, schemers will let the targeted people gain benefits outside established rules so that they can recruit them as their confederates. Regarding this phenomenon, we can find a typical example from the political history of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) of China.

In the early 8th century, many schemers appeared in the political circle of the Tang Dynasty, such as Empress Wei (?-710) and her daughter Princess Li Guoer (685-710). Their aims were the same: controlling the imperial court of the Tang Dynasty. In this period, many of them started to conduct large-scale sales of official positions (Ouyang & Song, 2000). As a matter of fact, they were adopting this method to amass wealth and win over supporters. The officials who gained official positions through such exchanges were called xiefeng officials (Ouyang & Song, 2000). According to the historical records in *The New Book of Tang*, among Princess Li Guoer's political partisans, the number of xiefeng officials was the largest (Ouyang & Song, 2000). The appearance of this phenomenon directly damaged the climate of the Tang Dynasty's political circle.

The example introduced above is a typical one of schemers letting their targeted people gain benefits outside established rules. There's no doubt that the schemers adopting these methods to recruit individuals as their confederates will directly damage the equitable environment of society.

In addition, drawing on historical precedents, officials are not the only group that schemers may recruit as their confederates. Other groups, such as businessmen, scholars, and even some influential foreigners, may also become the targets of schemers. Simply because schemers need to leverage these people's influence across various sectors to advance their conspiracies.

Then, let's think about another important question? Will schemers place sufficient trust in their confederates? From the example of Jia Nanfeng and Sima Wei, it is easy to see that the answer to this question is no. Thus, sometimes, schemers may seek to exercise further control over their confederates. For example, in history, some schemers were good at adopting honey traps. There's no doubt that this method will help them better control their confederates. By the way, because of the development of science and technology, since the 20th century, there have appeared many new types of honey trap. For example, in the 20th century, scandalous photos started to be used to threaten and control the targeted people (Lewis, 2015). As a matter of fact, how schemers control their confederates is a really complex issue which is worth being explored in an entire thesis.

In a word, there's no doubt that the behaviors of schemers recruiting certain individuals as their confederates will directly break the orderly status of the political circle and society. For the whole society, there's no doubt that it will finally lead to a large disaster.

Thus, if want to keep the political circle and society in an orderly status, it will be important to identify

schemers and their confederates. Schemers and their confederates usually have two characteristics:

1. They invariably seek to undermine the educational system, because the disorder of the educational system will finally break the orderly status of society.

2. They usually fiercely resist policies and strategies beneficial to economic development and social progress.

Through these two characteristics, it will be easy to identify schemers and their confederates. By the way, the ones who attack the contents of this paper are also really suspicious, simply because this paper unmasks their pretentious veneer.

Retainers: The Special Confederates of Schemers

In history, there existed a kind of special confederate of schemers. Compared with common confederates, this kind of confederate maintained a much stronger relationship of dependency with schemers. This kind of confederate is usually described as a retainer.

As mentioned before, the soldiers of Ch'oe Ch'ung-hŏn's private armed forces were his household slaves. He needed some trusted followers to help him manage these soldiers. In this situation, retainers became his best choice. As a matter of fact, in ancient times, it was not rare for those schemers and powerful ministers to maintain retainer groups. Apart from Goryeo, similar phenomena also appeared in the history of many other countries.

However, from many examples in history, it is easy to see that schemers and their retainers would not share complete mutual trust. As mentioned before, sometimes, schemers need to conceal their ambitions. When necessary, they will sacrifice their retainers without hesitation. As a matter of fact, in the eyes of many schemers, retainers are nothing more than expendable pawns.

A typical example of this phenomenon happened in the Three Kingdoms period of medieval China. In 260, the Sima clan had become the most powerful political clan of the Wei Kingdom. At that time, Sima Zhao (211-265), one of the sons of Sima Yi, was the leader of this clan. In this year, unwilling to be Sima's puppet, Emperor Cao Mao (241-260) led his palace guards to assault Sima's residence (Fang, 2014). On the way, the emperor met the troops of Sima. Cheng Ji (?-260), one of the retainers of Sima, attacked the emperor with a halberd, finally killing him on his chariot (Fang, 2014).

What happened next was a grimly ironic episode in the political history of medieval China. At that time, though Sima stood on the very brink of seizing the throne, he still wished to preserve his public persona as a loyal minister in the eyes of the grand ministers. Thus, he ultimately condemned Cheng Ji to the supreme penalty: extermination of his three clans (including the father's clan, the mother's clan, and the wife's clan) (Fang, 2014).

When the soldiers of Sima surrounded the residence of Cheng Ji, Cheng Ji and his brother Cheng Cui (?-260), an officer of the Wei army, refused to submit to punishment immediately (Chen & Pei, 2006). Stripped to the torso, they climbed onto the roof, uttering obscene and insolent remarks (Chen & Pei, 2006). The soldiers of Sima shot at them from below, and they were finally slain (Chen & Pei, 2006). This event let the attempt of Sima trying to preserve his public persona finally fail.

In subsequent Chinese history, Cheng Ji became a byword for people who transgressed established rules to gratify their leader, yet were ultimately cast aside as expendable pawns by the same leader. Of course, this kind of person still exists in reality all around the world.

Since schemers would treat their retainers as expendable tools, these retainers might not maintain absolute loyalty toward their masters. In fact, examples in which schemers, warlords, or powerful ministers were killed by their retainers are not rare in history. For example, in 1258, the sixty-year rule of four generations of the Ch'oe

clan was ended by the coup launched by some of its retainers (Chǒng, 2013). Before the coup, these retainers successfully gained the support of many soldiers of the Ch'oe clan's private armed forces (Chǒng, 2013). During the coup, Ch'oe Ŭi (?-1258), the last leader of the Ch'oe clan, was killed by these soldiers (Chǒng, 2013). His death directly brought the rule of the Ch'oe clan to an end.

In ancient China, the most famous event of a retainer killing his master happened in 192. Wang Yun (137-192), a senior official of the late Eastern Han Dynasty, wanted to kill Dong Zhuo (?-192), a powerful minister who controlled the central government of the Eastern Han Dynasty through his elite private army (Fan, 2007). On one occasion, when chatting with Lü Bu (?-199), a retainer of Dong, Wang learned that Lü once fell into dispute with Dong over minor grievances, narrowly escaping being killed by Dong (Fan, 2007). After that, Wang tried to persuade Lü to kill Dong (Fan, 2007). Finally, with the assistance of an officer named Li Su (?-192) and several soldiers, Lü successfully killed Dong with a spear within the imperial palace (Fan, 2007). According to the theoretical system of the traditional Chinese art of war, the stratagem adopted by Wang is called killing someone with a borrowed knife, the third stratagem recorded in *The Thirty-Six Stratagems* (Cheng, 1999). The key to his successful execution of this stratagem mainly relied on exploiting Lü's resentment toward Dong.

As a matter of fact, in history, many schemers, warlords, or powerful ministers were killed by their retainers because they neither granted their retainers basic respect nor remained alert to the retainers' attitudes.

In a word, schemers and their retainers would not share complete mutual trust, simply because the lord-retainer relationship between them was maintained by interests. Once this interest-based bond was broken, this kind of relationship would cease to exist.

Conclusion

From the events that have happened in history, it is easy to see that private armed forces and confederates were two terrifying weapons of schemers. The schemers could not advance their conspiracies without the assistance of these two groups. Drawing on historical precedents, for every country, schemers will pose a grave threat, because during the process of advancing their conspiracies, they will bring about enormous disasters. Thus, the study of the relationship among schemers, private armed forces, and confederates is of great importance. In addition, from many historical events, it is easy to see that the relationships among these three groups are complex and diverse, and are not entirely stable, simply because the most important bond among them is interest.

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