



Defense Mobilization in the Battle of Yiling in "Romance of the Three Kingdoms": Insights and Implications

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Abstract. This article takes the Battle of Yiling as the subject of research within the narrative of "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," conducting an in-depth analysis of the distinct strategies and measures employed by the states of Shu and Wu during the phase of war mobilization. By comparing the extensive military campaign initiated by Shu with Wu's defensive mobilization actions, the paper places particular emphasis on how Wu, when confronted with formidable challenges, successfully countered Shu's offensive through scientifically sound strategic planning, efficient military organization, precise allocation of resources, and adaptable diplomatic tactics in its defense mobilization efforts. The article asserts that the practice of defense mobilization demonstrated by Wu during the Battle of Yiling furnishes rich historical experience and profound insights for modern defense mobilization. These include the significance of strategic decision-making, the pivotal role of materiel reserves and logistical support, the effective mobilization and integration of human resources, and the skillful application of diverse methods in complex domestic and international environments to achieve strategic objectives.

Keywords: Battle of Yiling; Wu State; Defense.

1 Introduction

National defense mobilization refers to the series of preparations and actions taken by a nation to enhance its defense capabilities in response to wars or other security threats. It encompasses a broad array of activities, including the mobilization of armed forces, national economic mobilization, civil air defense mobilization, transportation mobilization, scientific and technological mobilization, information mobilization, among others.

As a vital component of national security, defense mobilization serves as a key instrument in safeguarding a nation's safety and developmental interests. The Battle of Yiling, also known as the Battle of Yiling or the Battle of Xiaoting, was a large-scale military campaign initiated by Emperor Liu Bei of Shu Han against Eastern Wu during the Three Kingdoms period. This battle stands as a celebrated instance of suc-

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Z. Zhan et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 10th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 858,

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-277-4_102

successful active defense in the annals of ancient Chinese warfare, and marks the final installment of the "Three Great Battles" of the Three Kingdoms era. In the year 219 AD, following the stabilization of Yi Province and Hanzhong under his rule, Liu Bei's general in charge of Jing Province, Guan Yu, launched a northern expedition against Cao Cao. Guan Yu's forces notably inundated seven armies, captured Yu Jin, executed Pang De, and laid siege to Cao Ren at Fan Castle, thus instilling fear across the North. However, Cao Cao later adopted a strategy proposed by Sima Yi and joined forces with Sun Quan to ambush Guan Yu's rear base. Following a setback in battle against Xu Huang's forces, Guan Yu retreated to Maicheng, where he was ultimately captured and executed by Sun Quan. Upon ascending to the imperial throne, Liu Bei sought to avenge Guan Yu's death and regain control of Jing Province.

In the year 221 AD, he led a massive army numbering tens of thousands from Shu Han to launch an attack on Eastern Wu in what became known as the Battle of Yiling. During this confrontation, Wu's national defense mobilization demonstrated remarkable strategic acumen and execution, playing a decisive role in overcoming the formidable enemy. This paper particularly examines the strategic choices made by Wu during the war mobilization phase, evaluates their effectiveness, and draws out valuable lessons for contemporary defense mobilization practices.[1][2]

2 Wu State's Defense Mobilization

Wu's strategic objectives were to defend Jing Province, prevent further expansion by Shu Han, maintain stability within the alliance between Sun and Liu (Shu), and ensure the security of Eastern Wu.

To achieve these goals, Wu implemented the following measures in its national defense mobilization:

2.1 Political Mobilization

The rulers and ministers of Eastern Wu collectively decided to form an alliance with Wei against Shu. In Chapter 82 "Sun Quan Accepts Nine Bestowments from Wei; Liu Bei Rewards His Six Armies," courtier Zhao Zhi suggested: "His Majesty should draft a memorial, and I am willing to serve as envoy to visit Cao Pi, Emperor of Wei, to explain the advantages and disadvantages.

By urging him to attack Han Zhong, the Shu forces would naturally be put in a precarious position." Sun Quan agreed, saying, "This plan is excellent. But when you go, do not compromise the dignity of Eastern Wu." Zhao Zhi went to meet Cao Pi, presenting the case with both humility and confidence. Cao Pi then ordered Grand Master Xing Zhen to confer upon Sun Quan the title of King of Wu and bestow upon him the Nine Ranks of Honor.

By acknowledging Cao Pi's suzerainty and improving relations, Sun Quan successfully diverted part of the strategic pressure and avoided fighting on two fronts. Wu's strategic decision-making demonstrated remarkable flexibility and foresight by

forming an alliance with Wei to relieve some of the strategic stress and evade the predicament of a two-front war.

2.2 Military Mobilization

Appointing Lu Xun for proactive defense, Eastern Wu meticulously planned its military strategy during the Battle of Yiling.

Sun Quan personally participated in devising the war plans and appointed Lu Xun, who held the posts of Right Protector General and Governor of Western Regions, as the Supreme Commander, commanding troops under generals such as Zhu Ran, Pan Zhang, Han Dang, Xu Sheng, and Sun Han to confront the Shu forces. Lu Xun carefully analyzed factors such as the strength and morale of both armies and the terrain, concluding that due to the overwhelming numbers and high morale of the Shu troops occupying strongholds, Wu forces should initially avoid direct confrontation and wait for the opportune moment to defeat the enemy. He patiently convinced Wu's generals to abandon immediate calls for decisive battle. Lu Xun decisively carried out a strategic retreat, withdrawing all the way to the lines of Yi Dao and Xiaoting. Thereafter, he shifted to a strategic defensive stance, halting the advance of the Shu army. He fortified camps along the area of Yiling, set up beacon towers, and reinforced the defenses of his troops. Based on the terrain and enemy situation, Lu Xun appropriately allocated forces and arranged defensive and offensive tactics. Thus, the Wu army completely evacuated the mountainous areas, leaving hundreds of miles of difficult terrain to the Shu forces.

2.3 Maintaining Defense and Waiting for Opportunities

While Lu Xun firmly held key positions and refused to engage in battle, the Shu army had no choice but to establish dozens of camps over a stretch of several hundred miles from Wushan to Yiling. Liu Bei aimed for a swift confrontation and assigned General Feng Xi as the Grand Commander, Zhang Nan as the vanguard, and other commanders like Fu Kang, Zhao Rong, Liao Chun, and Fu Rong to lead separate forces. Initially, he sent General Wu Ban with thousands of troops to pitch camp on level ground and provoke the Wu army. However, Lu Xun remained steadfast and ignored the provocations. Later, when Liu Bei deployed Wu Ban again with thousands more troops and concealed another 8,000 soldiers in the valleys to lure the Wu army into a trap, Lu Xun still maintained his composure and did not take the bait. By remaining steadfast and not engaging in battle, Lu Xun undermined Liu Bei's strategy of relying on numerical superiority to win a quick victory. The Shu troops gradually lost morale and initiative, exacerbated by the intense summer heat in June. Helplessly, Liu Bei moved his navy onto land and established camps deep in the mountains and forests near water sources, intending to regroup and resume attacks in autumn. Due to logistical challenges and the scattered nature of the Shu army's encampment extending over two to three hundred kilometers of rugged terrain far from their rear bases, they provided Lu Xun with an opportunity for strategic counterattack. Strategic Counterattack: Setting Fire to the Shu Camps Lu Xun's wise decision to ignite the Shu army's

interconnected camps enabled the Eastern Wu forces to fully exploit their combat potential and ultimately triumph in the Battle of Yiling. Seeing the decline in Shu army's morale and noting that they had abandoned their combined water-land approach to directly confront the Wu army, Lu Xun judged that the time for strategic counterattack was ripe. He wrote to King Sun Quan, stating that initially, the concern was the Shu army's joint riverine and land assault. Now that they had abandoned their naval strategy and set up numerous camps on land, there seemed to be no significant tactical changes, which presented an opportunity to strike and defeat them easily. Sun Quan promptly approved Lu Xun's plan to transition from defense to offense. Before launching a large-scale counteroffensive, Lu Xun first dispatched a small unit for a probing attack. Although this initial attempt was unsuccessful, it allowed Lu Xun to identify a method to break the enemy—a fire attack on the interconnected Shu camps. Given the scorching summer weather, the Shu camps built of wooden barricades and surrounded by trees and grass were highly susceptible to conflagration. Once the decisive battle began, Lu Xun ordered his soldiers to carry bundles of straw and stealthily attack the Shu camps at night, setting them ablaze with the wind at their backs. A raging inferno ensued, causing chaos among the Shu ranks. Taking advantage of the situation, Lu Xun launched a full-fledged counterattack, forcing the Shu army to retreat westward. General Zhu Ran led 5,000 troops to breach the Shu frontlines and penetrate their rearguard, joining forces with General Han Dang to besiege the Shu forces at Zhuo Xiang, cutting off their escape route. General Pan Zhang's division fiercely attacked General Feng Xi's troops, inflicting heavy losses. Generals such as Zhugejin, Luo Tong, and Zhou Yin coordinated with Lu Xun's main force to attack the Shu army at Xiaoting. Meanwhile, General Sun Han, defending Yi Dao, also launched an offensive to join the fray. The Wu forces advanced rapidly, capturing over forty Shu camps and using their navy to cut off communications between the Shu forces on both sides of the Yangtze River. Key Shu commanders such as Zhang Nan, Feng Xi, and the tribal leader Shamoke perished, while others like Du Lu and Liu Ning surrendered. Upon seeing his forces collapse, Liu Bei fled to the northwest towards Ma'an Mountain, ordering the remnants of his army to defend themselves atop the surrounding heights. Lu Xun concentrated his forces and besieged them from all sides, further decimating the Shu troops, killing or routing nearly ten thousand more.

In this battle, Wu entrusted Lu Xun as the supreme commander, who, through meticulous military deployment and flexible tactical adjustments tailored to the characteristics of the Shu army, successfully executed a strategy of proactive defense. Lu Xun wisely chose to avoid direct conflict, employing a defensive retreat strategy that preserved his forces and created favorable conditions for the eventual counteroffensive.[3]

Thus, the Eastern Wu prepared ample supplies and provisions before the battle. In Chapter 84, "Lu Xun Sets Fire to Seven Hundred Li of Camps; Zhuge Liang Skillfully Deploys the Eight Trigrams Formation," the troops were arranged, and materials for a fire attack were readied: Zhuge Jin was ordered to advance by waterway; the next day, when a strong southeast wind arose in the afternoon, boats were loaded with thatch, executing the plan accordingly. General Han Dang led one army to attack the

northern bank of the river, while General Zhou Tai led another army against the southern bank; each soldier carried a bundle of thatch, secretly filled with sulfur and saltpeter, equipped with fire starters and armed with spears and swords. They were to simultaneously storm the Shu camps, igniting fires once they arrived according to the direction of the wind. Of the forty Shu encampments, only twenty were targeted for burning, with each adjacent camp being set alight after the previous one. Each troop was to bring along dry provisions and was forbidden to retreat temporarily; they were to relentlessly pursue the enemy around the clock until capturing Liu Bei himself. Upon hearing these orders, the generals departed having received their instructions. Eastern Wu thoroughly prepared the necessary resources beforehand and made timely adjustments based on battlefield conditions during the war, ensuring its frontline forces' endurance and sustained combat capability. Furthermore, Eastern Wu adopted pragmatic diplomatic maneuvers. While Sun Quan dispatched Zhuge Jin as an envoy to Shu, he also ordered the respectful repatriation of Wei generals such as Yu Jin back to Cao Wei, expressing his intention to submit as a vassal state. This pragmatic diplomacy allowed Sun Quan to buy time for war preparations while negotiating with Shu, thereby laying the groundwork for the eventual victory in the Battle of Yiling. Leveraging local human resources and geographical advantages, Eastern Wu effectively organized its populace to support the war effort, enhancing the fighting power and stability of its military forces.[1][2]

3 Shu State's Defense Mobilization

3.1 Political Mobilization

Liu Bei, driven by his desire for vengeance following the death of his sworn brother Guan Yu, launched a military campaign without a long-term strategic blueprint or meticulous operational plans. Overwhelmed by personal vendetta, Liu Bei neglected the broader perspective of Shu-Han's national interest, as epitomized by Zhao Yun's remark, "Avenging the Han Dynasty's enemies is a public cause, while avenging one's own kin is a private affair." Ignoring the counsel of Zhao Yun, Qin Mi, and Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei personally led the expedition, thereby undermining the Shu-Wu alliance.[3]

3.2 Military Deployment and Mobilization

Determined to invade Wu, Liu Bei rigorously trained and prepared his troops daily. His strategic deployment involved ordering Zhuge Liang to safeguard the prince and defend the Two Rivers region, with Ma Chao and Ma Dai assisting Wei Yan in guarding Hanzhong to fend off Wei's forces. Zhao Yun served as the rearguard and oversaw logistics; Huang Quan and Cheng Ji acted as advisors; Ma Liang and Chen Zhen handled administrative documents; Huang Zhong assumed the role of vanguard; with Feng Xi and Zhang Nan as deputy commanders, Fu Tong and Zhang Yi as central guard protectors, and Zhao Rong and Liao Chun providing backup. Liu Bei assembled hundreds of Shu generals alongside warriors from the Five Creeks, totaling a

massive force of 750,000 men, ready for deployment. After the assassination of Zhang Fei by his subordinates Fan Jiang and Zhang Da, Liu Bei appointed Wu Ban as the vanguard, with Zhang Bao and Guan Xing accompanying him. Both land and naval forces advanced towards Eastern Wu. Upon the death of Huang Zhong, Liu Bei's grief intensified his hatred for Wu. He divided his army into two wings, advancing simultaneously by land and sea. After executing Fan and Zhang and mourning Zhang Fei, Liu Bei insisted on capturing Sun Quan alive before ending the campaign. Despite hearing that Sun Quan had appointed the young scholar Lu Xun as the Grand Commander, Liu Bei underestimated him. The vast Shu army moved from West Shu to Xiaoting, setting up over forty encampments spanning more than seven hundred miles, displaying an impressive show of banners by day and illuminating the night with campfires. Under Lu Xun's command, Wu's forces held tight to all strategic passes, refusing to engage in battle. When the scorching summer weather began to affect his soldiers, Liu Bei ordered the relocation of his camps into forests to endure the heat, intending to resume attacks in the autumn. Despite repeated advice from Ma Liang against camping in wooded areas, Liu Bei persisted. Lu Xun then directed his commanders to prepare incendiary devices and separately attack the Shu camps. The resulting rout saw Liu Bei retreating to Baidi Castle, where he soon passed away. While Shu was able to rapidly mobilize a substantial number of troops, Liu Bei's lack of expertise in battlefield deployments meant that the sheer size of his forces did not translate into optimal combat effectiveness. Instead, his hasty and emotional decisions compromised the strategic advantage and eventually led to a catastrophic defeat.[4][5]

4 Conclusions

The defense mobilization displayed by Wu during the Battle of Yiling offers several instructive lessons for China's current defense mobilization efforts:

4.1 The Importance of Strategic Planning

During the Battle of Yiling, Wu formulated a clear strategic plan, deploying its forces purposefully based on its strength and strategic objectives. This experience enlightens the necessity for China to emphasize the scientific and forward-looking nature of strategic planning in defense mobilization. Accordingly, China should develop reasonable defense mobilization plans in line with the current national security environment and strategic requirements.[6][7]

4.2 Critical Role of Material Reserves and Logistic Support

Wu's attention to the accumulation and supply of resources during the conflict ensured its military's combat effectiveness. This serves as a reminder for China to bolster its defense material reserves and management, establishing a sound reserve system to guarantee timely and adequate logistical support during emergencies.

4.3 Efficient Utilization of Human Resources

Through effective mobilization of its human resources, Wu fully leveraged the power of its populace. This lesson underscores the importance for China to focus on national defense education for its citizens, heightening their awareness and involvement in national defense matters. Furthermore, China should invest in talent cultivation and reserve forces to ensure a robust and readily accessible human resource pool for defense mobilization. Defense mobilization constitutes a sophisticated and intricate engineering project. By drawing upon historical experiences with flexibility, China should continually refine and optimize its defense mobilization system to meet the evolving security challenges of the new era. This calls for a dynamic approach that adapts to new circumstances while maintaining a rigorous framework for strategic planning, material readiness, and human capital development.[8]

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