



# Tiger and Leopard Cavalry: An Elite Private Army under the Background of Warlordism

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**Abstract.** Late Eastern Han Dynasty (184-220) was a famous period in Chinese war history. In this period, many warlords of the Han Dynasty started to build their private army with elite soldiers, letting it become a fashion. Cao Cao (155-220) was one of the warlords who was enthusiastic about this matter, building many private armies. Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was the most famous and excellent one, helping Cao get many victories during the process of unifying Northern China. Because of that, Tiger and Leopard army finally obtained a position in the history of Chinese cavalry's development.

**Keywords:** Tiger and Leopard Cavalry, cavalry, late Eastern Han Dynasty, Cao Cao, warlords

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Because of the influence of a classical Chinese fiction named *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the Chinese history from 184 to 280 always attracts widespread attention. Cao Cao, the super villain in the novel usually could gain many fans no matter in which periods. However, in history, Cao could not be seen as a super villain. The identity of politician and strategist was the best description of him. In his military career, he not only reunified the Northern area of China but also laid the foundation for the establishment of the Wei Kingdom (220-266). Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was built in the process of the reunifying of Northern China, usually acting as the spearhead of the Cao army. However, when researching about Cao Cao and his military career, many scholars usually ignored the importance of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry because of the lack of military knowledge. As a matter of fact, the tactic and selection method of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry still have reference value for modern military construction. The aim of this paper is to restore the appearance of Tiger and Leopard army, summarizing the experience of military construction through researching the history of this troop. At the same time, I once mentioned this army in one of my papers named *Research on the Battle of White Wolf Mountain* (2022). I think it is necessary for me to research more about this troop.

Because of being ignored for a long time, the information about this troop was relatively little which was the largest difficulty I met in the process of research. Fortu-

nately, the biographies of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry's commanders were recorded in an authoritative historical records named *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (280s). At the same time, another authoritative historical record named *Book of Later Han* (445) is also of great reference value. The information in these two history records was the core of this research.

## 2 HISTORY BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The Warlordism in Late Eastern Han Dynasty

**The Yellow Turbans Uprising, the Start of Warlordism.** In 184, an uprising became the event which greatly changed the historical trend of China. Since every soldier of insurrectionary army wore a yellow turban, the uprising was called the Yellow Turbans Uprising. Though the main force of insurrectionary army was quickly defeated by the government army of Eastern Han Dynasty, the remainder still kept fighting. In this process, the central government started to lose control of local power. The Eastern Han Dynasty entered the period of warlordism.

**Private Army System: The Foundation of Late Eastern Han Dynasty's Warlordism.** During the process of repressing the uprising, the central government of Eastern Han Dynasty started to use the private army of local power's leaders to supplement the force of government [1]. In Chinese, the private army of local power was called Buqu. In late Eastern Han Dynasty, many leaders of local power had their own Buqu. As a matter of fact, in that period, a warlord bloc was a union of different Buqu. Cao Cao was one of the bloc's leader.

### 2.2 The Elite Armies of Warlords

**The Extreme of Private Army System.** Because late Eastern Han Dynasty was the first warlordism period, it developed many rules which was obeyed by the warlords in later generations. Building one or a few elite armies to act as personal guard was the most famous one. The warlord would choose less than ten thousand elite soldiers, forming a little army. In late Eastern Dynasty, these soldiers did not gain a special name. In Tang Dynasty (618-907), these elite soldiers were called Ya Bing. In Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), these soldiers were called Jia Ding. As a matter of fact, these were the armies of the same purpose. They not only acted as the body guards of the warlords, but also acted as the trump card on the battle field.

**The Famous Personal Guard in Late Eastern Han Dynasty.** As one of the warlords in late Eastern Han Dynasty, Cao built his own personal guard in the 200s. This army was called Tiger and Leopard Cavalry. However, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was not the earliest personal guard of warlords in that period. Before that, a few little armies of different warlords had appeared on the battle field. Their information was as shown in

Table.1. In 2019, a computer game named Total war: Three Kingdoms lets these armies become famous all around the world.

**Table 1.** The information of three warlords' personal guards during late Eastern Han Dynasty

Name	Services and Arms	Warlord	Number of People
Breaking enemy ranks Army	Heavily armed soldiers	Lv Bu (?-199)	Less than eight hundred [2]
Large Halberd Soldiers	Heavy infantry	Yuan Shao (?-202)	Less than two hundred (during the battle of Jieqiao in 191) [3]
White Horse Fellows	Horse archers	Gongsun Zan (?-199)	Less than one Hundred (early stage) [3] A few thousand (late stage) [2]

From the table, we can summarize this kind of army's two features. First, because the high standard of requirements, in a guard army, the number of people usually much fewer than common army. More importantly, having clear purpose, the soldiers of guard army usually of the same arm of the services.

This phenomenon kept appearing in Three Kingdoms Period. The most famous example happened in the Han Kingdom (221-263). Zhuge Liang (181-234), the prime minister of the Han Kingdom, once built an army named Invincible Flying Army after he conquering the barbarians of Southwest area. This army consisted of more than ten thousand soldiers [4]. Most of them were excellent bowmen or crossbowmen.

However, there was an accepted fact that Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was the most powerful personal guard in that period because of its special system. In the process of Cao Cao's military career, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry won every battle they took part in, helping Cao become the overlord of Northern China.

### 3 THE STRUCTURE OF TIGER AND LEOPARD CAVALRY

#### 3.1 The Commanders and Soldiers of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry

**The Commanders of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** As mentioned before, the soldiers of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry were the body guards of Cao Cao. Therefore, their commanders must be the people that Cao could trust. As a matter, all of the commanders in chief of Tiger and Leopard cavalry were from the Cao family. According to *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, the first commander in chief of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was Cao Chun (170-210), the cousin of Cao Cao [2]. As a matter of fact, from 205 to 208, once Cao Chun appeared on the battlefield, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry would also fought in the battle. Cao Chun and his cavalymen totally fought in three important battles, earning a reputation of bravery for this army.

After Cao Chun's death, Cao Cao could not found a suitable person to take the place of him. Therefore, Cao Cao acted as the commander for a long time. Finally, two young men named Cao Xiu (?-228) and Cao Zhen (?-231) were selected as the new commanders of Tiger and Leopard army. They were the sons of Cao Cao's cousins [2].

In a word, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was an army which had a strong warlordism color. As a matter of fact, it was also the characteristic of the Cao army. The generals of the Cao army could be divided into two parts: the generals of clan (the generals whose family name was Cao or Xiahou) and other generals. The generals of clan were quite important for Cao Cao's military career. Without these people, Cao had no chance to built his first army. As a matter of fact, clan power was quite important in ancient China, appearing in the whole Chinese feudalism times. Until today, it is still influencing some areas of China.

The element of clan power made Tiger and Leopard Cavalry totally different from other guard armies of that period. Because of that, the loyalty of this army was indisputable.

**The Soldiers of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** According to the records, the selection criteria of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was really high. The soldiers of these army were the officers of other armies [2]. Therefore, their skills of fighting were of higher level than common soldiers. As a matter of fact, it was a last-ditch move of Cao Cao. The battle of Nanpi (happened in early 205) was the first time that Tiger and Leopard army appeared on the battlefield [2]. Thus, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry must be built in 204 or before. In that period, the best cavalymen came from three prefectures: You (including today's Beijing, Liaoning, north region of Hebei of China and the north-west region of North Korea), Bing (including some places in today's Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, Hebei, and Shaanxi) and Liang (located in today's Northwest China). Unfortunately, before 205, these three areas did not belong to Cao. In order to got a powerful army in a short time, Cao had to build an army whose soldiers were the officers of other armies.

### 3.2 The Type of Cavalymen of Tiger and Leopard Army

**The Special Kind of Heavy Cavalry of Ancient China.** According to The Art of War in the western world, cavalry should be divided into two parts: heavy cavalry and light cavalry [5]. Briefly, heavy cavalry relied on shock tactic, using lance to attack their enemies. At the same time, light cavalry adopted shooting tactic, using bows and javelins. However, because of the appear of a kind of special ancient Chinese cavalry named Tuji, this classification is not applicable when researching the war history of ancient China. Tuji was a kind of cavalry appeared in Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-8). At the very beginning, it was called Tunji [7]. It was the first kind of Chinese heavy cavalry, equipped with halberd and crossbow (as shown in figure 1), having the ability of shocking and shooting. In later generations, it became the template of Chinese heavy cavalry. As heavy cavalry, they had the ability of shock because they were good at using long weapons such as spear and halberd. At the same time, they could act as light cavalry because they also had the ability of shooting. Of course, the tactic of the long-range sortie was the most valuable asset of them.



**Fig. 1.** A cavalryman of Western Han Dynasty's Tuji [8]

This kind of cavalry continued to be active on the battlefields of ancient China until the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) [9]. Over time, the equipment used by the Tuji kept being renewed [9]. In the Ming Dynasty, these cavalymen even started to use firelocks [9].

Therefore, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was also a kind of Tuji. However, compared with the initial version of Tuji (as shown in figure 1), the appearance and equipment of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry were totally different. More importantly, there appeared a phenomenon: the differentiation of Tuji.

**The Two Parts of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** Many records show that Tiger and Leopard Cavalry 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 (located in Beijing, China) [10]. One of them was shown in Figure 2. According to *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Tiger Cavalry once performed well during a battle between Cao Cao and Ma Chao (176-222), a warlord of Liang prefecture [2]. From the tactic adopted by Tiger Cavalry, we could infer that Tiger Cavalry was a kind of heavy cavalry, being keen on shock tactic. At the same time, the war horses of these cavalymen might also wear armor. Because according to an article written by one of Cao Cao's sons named Cao Zhi (192-232), armor of horses had appeared in China [11]. At the same time, one of Cao Cao's own articles also talked about the usage of armor for horse during the battle of Guandu (200) [11]. In Chinese, the cavalymen whose horses wore armor were called Jiaqi Juzhuang, a new type of Tuji which was different from the traditional one. It was always used to attack infantry square.



**Fig. 2.** An official seal of Leopard Cavalry's commander [10]

About Leopard Cavalry, the historical records did not describe it in detail. However, we still could find some clues about it. Cao Chun's cavalymen were also good at long-range sortie. This tactic helped them defeat their enemies in two battles. Clearly, the cavalry with heavy armor was not suitable for this tactic. There must be some cavalymen of light armor in Tiger and Leopard Cavalry. As mentioned before, Tiger Cavalry was heavy cavalry. Leopard Cavalry was the light cavalry who had the same equipment as traditional Tuji. It is the mainstream view about the difference between Tiger Cavalry and Leopard Cavalry.

## 4 THE EQUIPMENT OF TIGER AND LEOPARD CAVALRY

### 4.1 The Weapon of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry

**Lance.** In Eastern Han Dynasty, many cavalymen started to use lance to take the place of halberd [12]. Because lance was much more convenient when charging. The lance of China was called Shuo, which was a kind of spear with a long head.

In late Western Han Dynasty, high pommels started to take the place of the old ones [13]. The invention of high pommel greatly improved the cavalry's ability of charge. The built of Eastern Han Dynasty experienced the confrontation between Tuji and heavy infantry. In this process, some generals found that lance was the most suitable weapon for heavy cavalry. After that, lancers started to take the place of Western Han style's cavalry (as shown in figure 1). As the most famous heavy cavalry in late Eastern Han Dynasty, lance was a kind of necessary weapon of Tiger Cavalry.

**Halberd.** Though lance started to take the place of halberd in Eastern Han Dynasty, some generals and officers of the Cao army were still the fans of halberd. For example, according to *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, during the battle of Xiaoyao River (215), general Zhang Liao (169-222) and his halberd became the center of the battlefield. During the battle, general Zhang rushed into the enemy position, holding his halberd [2]. He killed dozens of the Wu army's soldiers by himself [2]. At the same time, two generals of the Wu army also died by his halberd [2]. Another general of the Cao army named Dian Wei (?-197) even had the ability to use two large halberds at the same time [2].

From the example, we could see that practicing the skill of using halberd was quite popular among the officers of the Cao army. The experience of Western Han's cavalry also showed that halberd was still useful for the light cavalry. Therefore, some cavalymen of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry might still use halberds as their main weapons.

**Sword.** Since Western Han Dynasty, using a sword as secondary weapon had become the tradition of Chinese cavalry. Before Tang Dynasty (618-907), the sword used by Chinese soldiers was called Huanshou Dao (as shown in Figure 3). Because of the influence of China, this kind of sword was learned and used by the armies whose areas were around China, such as Korean Peninsula and Japan.

For the soldiers of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry, it was also an important weapon. They need to use it to cut down their enemies' heads so that they could be rewarded accordingly.



Fig. 3. Huanshou Dao [14]

## 4.2 The Armor of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry

**The Most Familiar Strangers: The Difference Between Novels and Reality.** Currently, there were many misunderstandings about the war history of ancient China. Most of them came from the movies and TV dramas whose directors were of lack of history knowledge. As a matter of fact, most of the armor appeared in these movies and TV dramas were the type of the Ming Dynasty. At the same time, when the soldiers of Han Dynasty appeared on the screen, their clothes and armor were the type of Western Han Dynasty, no matter the story was about Western Han Dynasty or Eastern Han Dynasty. This phenomenon also happened in many movies and TV dramas about the Three Kingdoms period (220-280). Therefore, even most of the Chinese people do not know what the armor of the Three Kingdoms really looked like.

As a matter of fact, after coming to Eastern Han Dynasty, the armor of soldiers had developed to a new stage compared with Western Han Dynasty. The protection capability was greatly improved. According to *Records of the Three Kingdoms* and an article written by Cao Cao, in late Eastern Han Dynasty, armor could be divided into two parts: small armor and large armor [2] [11]. Small armor just could protect the chest and back of the soldiers. Large armor could also protect the shoulders and legs [15]. According to the biography of general Dian Wei, sometimes the soldiers would wear two kinds of armor at the same time [2]. Through research, it was a combination of a large armor and a small armor [15].

Different from those of the Western Han Dynasty, the heavy cavalymen of Eastern Han Dynasty paid much attention to the protection of the head. Therefore, helmets were of great importance.

In reality, the misunderstanding about late Eastern Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period does not just happen in the area of clothes and armor. The misunderstanding happened because many people could not distinguish novels from reality. For example, in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Guan Yu (?-220) used green dragon crescent blade as his weapon [16]. In history, he used lance or halberd. After all, crescent blade first appeared in Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). However, because of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*' influence, crescent blade is usually called guandao (the glaive of Guan Yu) by many Chinese people.

In fact, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* was written in Ming Dynasty. Therefore, the weapons and armor in the book were the same as those of the Ming army. Finding the difference between the novel and history is one of the greatest pleasures when researching about the history of late Eastern Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period.

**The Armor of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** Cao Zhi introduced five kinds of armor in his article *The armors that previous Emperor bestowed me*. Liang Dang armor was one of them. It was a kind of armor widely used by the soldiers from Eastern Han Dynasty to Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), having the ability to protect the chest and back. There was a statement that small armor was a kind of Liang Dang armor [15].

According to the leading explanation, large armor was called Tong Xiu Armor. This armor was like a barrel with two sleeves, hence its name in Chinese [14]. The earliest antique of it was unearthed in 1968 [17]. In Eastern Han Dynasty, Tong Xiu Kai experienced an improvement, adding the armor of neck. This kind of armor was called Pen Ling Armor. According to an official named Kong Rong's (153-208) records, this kind of armor was made of iron [11]. The image of a soldier wearing Tong Xiu armor was shown in figure 4. According to *Book of Song* (479), Zhuge Liang once designed a special kind of Tong Xiu Armor, having the ability to protect the soldiers from the attack of crossbow [18].



**Fig. 4.** A soldier of Eastern Han Dynasty, wearing Tong Xiu armor [19]

From the different combat missions of Tiger Cavalry and Leopard Cavalry, we could infer that small armor was suitable for the soldiers of Leopard Cavalry while large armor was suitable for the soldiers of Tiger Cavalry.

For Tiger cavalry, their horses would also wear armor because they needed to face the arrows and spears of infantry. For Leopard cavalry, horses' heavy armor would become a redundancy. Their horses just need a breastplate.



**The Helmet of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** In Eastern Han Dynasty, heavy cavalry started to pay attention to the importance of helmet. In this period, the helmet of the Han army was of the same manufacturing process as the armor, woven from iron sheets.

However, for the Han Dynasty's light cavalry such as Leopard Cavalry, helmet was not a necessity. In this situation, they usually used a cap to take the place of. The cap of the Cao army was designed by Cao Cao (as shown in figure 5) which was called Qia.



**Fig. 5.** The cap of the Cao army [17]

### 4.3 The Appearance of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry

**The Appearance of Tiger Cavalry.** Because Tiger Cavalry was heavy cavalry, facing the heavy infantry of enemy. We could infer the soldiers of Tiger Cavalry through its combat mission.

The soldiers of Tiger cavalry usually wore heavy armor (large armor). Sometimes they even needed to wear large armor and small armor at the same time. Of course every of them needed to wear a helmet. Their horses also wear heavy armor. They usually used lances as their main weapon.

**The Appearance of Leopard Cavalry.** For the soldiers of Leopard Cavalry, being the same as their light cavalry predecessors, a small armor was enough for them. They might also wear the cap designed by their leader Cao Cao. Lances, halberds and bows were their loyal comrades.

## 5 THE TACTICS OF TIGER AND LEOPARD CAVALRY

### 5.1 The Thought of Building Tiger and Leopard Cavalry

**Hypothetical Enemy.** Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was built during the war between Cao Cao and the Yuan family. Therefore, the Yuan army was the hypothetical enemy of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry. As mentioned before, Tiger and Leopard cavalry was a

binary army, including heavy cavalry and light cavalry. After knowing about the composition of the Yuan army, we would find out the reason of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry's particularity.

**The Composition of the Yuan army.** The base of the Yuan family was Ji prefecture (including today's middle south region of Hebei Province, west region of Shandong Province, and the north region of Henan Province). In Eastern Han Dynasty, the cross-bowmen of this area were really famous. Relying on these soldiers, Yuan Shao defeated White Horse Fellows and the cavalry of You prefecture in the battle of Jieqiao [2]. As mentioned before, the heavy infantry of Yuan was also excellent. In order to defeat the Yuan infantry, Cao needed excellent heavy cavalry (Tiger Cavalry).

Another important force of the Yuan army was the horse archers from Wuhuan, a nomadic troop living in Northeastern China. In order to defeat Gongsun Zan, the leader of You Prefecture and builder of White Horse Fellows, Yuan formed an alliance with Wuhuan [2] [3]. If wanted to defeat the nomadic troops, the heavy cavalry (both the soldier and the horse wearing armor) was not suitable. According to the experience of the Western Han army, the light cavalry with long weapons such as lance and halberd was the best choice. That's why Cao built the Leopard Cavalry.

**The Event that Greatly Influenced Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** In *The romance of the Three Kingdoms*, there was a famous plot named Guan Yu killing Yan Liang (?-200), a general of the Yuan army. This event really happened in history. In 200, during the battle of Baima, Yan Liang (?-200) was killed by Guan Yu (?-220). On the battlefield, Guan rushed to Yan, riding his horse [2]. Guan cut down Yan's head after killing him with a thrust [2]. Losing the commander, the Yuan army had to retreat [2]. Though Guan finally chose to leave the Cao army and follow Liu Bei (161-223), he made Cao impressed with his tactic. Charging and killing enemy's commanders finally became the basic tactic of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry. With this tactic, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry won every battle they fought. It was a combination of cavalry tactic and psychological tactic. I will introduce it in the next part.

## 6 THE TACTICS OF TIGER AND LEOPARD CAVALRY

### 6.1 Long-Range Sortie

**The Development of Long-Range Sortie.** Long-range sortie was a classical tactic of the Han nationality's cavalry. During the War Between Chu and Han (206 B.C.-202 B.C.), Xiang Yu (233 B.C.-202 B.C.) created this tactic. In Chinese, it was called the usage of cavalry's motility [20]. In the battle of Pengcheng (205 B.C.), Xiang's cavalry defeated the Han army after a half day's march [21]. In Western Han Dynasty, the Han Cavalry developed this tactic, creating a cavalry regiment of totally new style (Tuji). With this tactic, two generals named Wei Qing (?-106 B.C.) and Huo Qubing (140 B.C.-117 B.C.) defeated Xiongnu (the most powerful nomadic regime during Western Han Dynasty) for many times [21]. As a matter of fact, this tactic kept being popular

until the dissolution of Chinese cavalry. In late Eastern Han Dynasty, the Cao army was one of the military blocs that could make full use of this tactic.

**The Long-Range Sortie Tactic of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** From the features of this tactic, we could easily see that the combat missions of this tactic must be finished by light cavalry. Therefore, Leopard Cavalry was the army that was suitable for this tactic. However, compared with the tactic of the Western Han army, the long-range sortie tactic of Leopard Cavalry was much more efficient because the increasing emphasis of decapitation strike.

## 6.2 The Tactic of Decapitation Strike

**The Phenomenon of Beheading the Generals.** According to *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry totally appeared in four important battles. These cavalymen finished the missions of beheading the generals four times. As mentioned before, Guan Yu beheaded Yan Liang, making the Cao army easily get victory in the battle of Baima. This event greatly influenced the combat style of the Cao army. The officers of the Cao army found that the decapitation strike was a really effective tactic. After that, beheading the generals become a fashion in the Cao army. Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was an extreme example.

**A Successful Psychological Tactic.** As a matter of fact, the importance of decapitation strike was a hot topic that usually appeared in the ancient military culture of China. A famous Chinese poet named Du Fu (712-770) once wrote verse as aiming first at the rider's horse; first bringing the brigands' king to justice. It was a penetrating summary of decapitation strike. A famous Chinese military book named *The thirty-six stratagems* also described a tactic named capturing the ringleader first in order to capture the followers [22]. This tactic was quite popular was because it could destroy the morale of enemy in a short time. In ancient battlefield, morale was one of the most important factors.

In the battle of Nanpi, Tiger and Leopard first understood the high efficiency of this tactic. After that, this tactic became their trump card.

## 6.3 Charge Tactic

**The Importance of Charge Tactic.** We compared Tiger and Leopard cavalry to a fighting athlete. Long-range sortie and decapitation strike were his left fist and right fist. If he needs to defeat his enemy, he will need the skill of kicking. The charge tactic was the kick. Without this tactic, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry would not have the ability to break through the line of defense.

**The Development of Chinese Cavalry's Charge Tactic.** As a matter of fact, at the very beginning, charge tactic was used for defeating the horse archers. In Western Han

Dynasty, the Han cavalry needed to face the horse archers of Xiongnu. From the sculptures of that period, we could see that the original charge tactic usually appeared in the process of pursuing. The Han cavalry usually attacked the Xiongnu cavalry from behind with their halberd. In the early 1<sup>st</sup> century, the heavy cavalry from You prefecture participated in the war of founding Eastern Han Dynasty, defeating many armies from the central plains and developing the charge tactic of heavy cavalry. In this process, heavy cavalry's charge tactic started to be used for breaking through the line of heavy infantry. In late Eastern Han Dynasty, this tactic was inherited by the cavalry of the Cao army.

**The Charge Tactic of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry.** As mentioned before, the heavy infantry of the Yuan army was really powerful. As a matter of fact, his army was of typical central plains style, consisted of a number of heavy infantrymen and cross-bowmen. If someone wants to break through the line of these soldiers, he will need some heavy cavalymen to charge from the flank (or back) of the formation. It was the significance of Tiger Cavalry. From *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, we could see many related descriptions.

**The Level of Cao Cao's Charge Tactic.** As a matter of fact, many Chinese history researchers usually conjecture that the army of the Han Nationality could not defeat the nomads because the cavalry of the nomads was more powerful. As a matter of fact, it was just a kind of ignorance about Chinese war history. Even the nomads started to let heavy cavalry become their main force, they still could not defeat the heavy infantry of the Hans [23]. Because their charge tactic was of low level. However, the generals from the Han Nationality knew the real way to use this tactic to break through the line of heavy cavalry. The nomadic troops were over frenetic about the charge of heavy cavalry after learning it from the army of the Wei Kingdom (220-266) and Western Jin Dynasty (265-317). They usually saw it as the only method of fighting. Therefore, in Chinese history, they were usually defeated by the infantry of the Han Nationality. The correct charge tactic used by the Hans' heavy cavalry needed the cooperation of infantry square. When the enemy was greatly weakened by the infantry, the heavy cavalry would start to attack [23]. Cao was good at this tactic. With this tactic, he defeated the armies of Yuan Tan and Ma Chao in two different battles. I will introduce them in the next part.

## 7 THE CLASSICAL BATTLES OF TIGER AND LEOPARD CAVALRY

### 7.1 The Introduction of the Battles that Tiger and Leopard Cavalry Participated in

According to The Records of the Three Kingdoms, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry totally participated in four important battles. Maybe it also participated in other battles which

were not recorded in the history books. As a matter of fact, these battles were decisive for the Cao army.

## 7.2 The Battle of Nanpi

**The Process of the Battle of Nanpi.** In 200, the Cao army defeated Yuan Shao in the battle of Guandu [2]. Two years later, because of Yuan's death, the Yuan army rent in two by civil war. Yuan Shao's two sons named Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang (?-207) started to fight for the leadership. In order to defeat his brother, Yuan Tan was allied with Cao Cao. However, in 204, Yuan Tan broke the alliance because his brother's army was greatly weakened by Cao. Thinking that having the chance to be a local despot, Yuan started a series of military actions. In December 204, the Cao army started to fight back. In January 205, the Cao army and the Yuan army started to fight in Nanpi (located in today's Hebei Province, China). There were two statements about the process of the battle. According to *Book of Later Han*, the Yuan army was defeated before arraying [3]. However, according to *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, it was a fierce battle between the Cao army and the Yuan army [2]. During the battle, so many soldiers of the Cao army were killed that Cao Cao even decided to retreat [2]. However, Cao Chun, the commander of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry insisted to attack. Finally, Yuan Tan was beheaded by the soldiers of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry [2].

**The Analysis of the Battle of Nanpi.** As a matter of fact, based on two different history books, we can get totally different results when researching about the tactics adopted by Tiger and Leopard Cavalry. Based on the words of *Book of Later Han*, the Cao army defeated Yuan Tan with an assault. The soldiers of the Yuan army even had no chance to finish arraying. Yuan was killed because of the pursuit of the Cao cavalry. He fell off the horse, begging hard for his life [3]. The cavalymen cut down his head before he finished talking [3].

According to *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry started to attack after the Yuan army was weakened by other troops of the Cao army. As a matter of fact, both statements were accord with the combat style of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry. We could not determine that which statement was correct. However, no matter adopt which statement, the charge tactic of cavalry was necessary. There was an undeniable fact that, Tiger and Leopard broke through the line of the Yuan army in a short time after entering the battle field. It was the first time that Tiger and Leopard Cavalry participated in the battle, establishing its own combat style. A fast, accurate and ruthless combat style would kept accompanying these soldiers until they disappeared in history.

## 7.3 The Battle of White Wolf Mountain

**The Brief Introduction of Wuhuan.** Wuhuan was a nomadic troop living in north-eastern China. In late Eastern Han Dynasty, because of the chaos of central plains, Wuhuan started to attacked the border of Han Empire. At the same time, some young

man of this nationality also served as cavalymen in the Han army. In the 190s, in order to defeat Gongsun Zan (the leader of You prefecture), Yuan Shao formed an alliance with Wuhuan. These excellent horse archers were really of great importance during the war between Gongsun and Yuan. Finally, Gongsun was defeated by the allied forces of Yuan and Wuhuan [2] [3]. In the 200s, they still fought for the Yuan army, trying to protect Yuan Shang and Yuan Xi (?-207) from being captured by the Cao army. As a matter of fact, before the battle of Nanpi, a chief of Wuhuan named Su Pu Yan (?-207) planned to help Yuan Tan with his five thousand cavalymen [2]. His action finally was stopped by Qian Zhao (?-231), a general of the Cao army [2]. In order to end the war, Cao Cao planned to attack Liucheng (located in today's Chaoyang, Liaoning Province, China), the base of Wuhuan.

**The Process of the Battle of White Wolf Mountain.** In 207, in order to defeat the Yuan family and Wuhuan, Cao Cao started a military action with some elite soldiers. Cao Chun and his cavalymen also joined the expedition [3]. After a long march, the Cao cavalry met the main force of Wuhuan (tens of thousands of cavalymen) near the White Wolf Mountain (located in today's Chaoyang, Liaoning Province, China). After seeing the chaos of Wuhuan's military array, led by Zhang Liao, the elite cavalymen started to charge the Wuhuan cavalry from White Wolf Mountain [2]. Ta Dun (?-207), one of the leaders of Wuhuan was captured by Tiger and Leopard Cavalry. Another statement was that Ta Dun was killed by Zhang Liao. No matter adopting which statement, there was a fact that Tiger and Leopard Cavalry once participated in the battle of White Wolf Mountain. As a result, Wuhuan was totally destroyed by the Cao army which was a great victory of the Han Nationality's army. After the war, many Wuhuan cavalymen chose to join the Cao army [2]. In the same year, Yuan Shang and Yuan Xi were killed by Gongsun Kang (?-?), the warlord of Liaodong area (located in today's Liaoning and Jilin Provinces, China) [2] [3].

**The Analysis of the Battle of White Wolf Mountain.** As a matter of fact, during this battle, the performance of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was normal. Its light cavalry adopted the traditional tactics of the Han Cavalry, the combination of long-range sortie and charge tactic. It was a common tactic during the war between Han Empire and Xiongnu. After reading the war history of Western Han Dynasty, we could find that the military action of the Cao army was a facsimile of many battles of the Han cavalry defeating Xiongnu horse archers. However, Cao could destroy a nationality through only one military action. One reason was that the army of Wuhuan was much weaker than that of Xiongnu Empire. Another reason was that compared with the common cavalymen of Han Dynasty, the soldiers of Tiger and Leopard cavalry were much more similar to hunters. Their prey was Ta Dun, the commander of Wuhuan. It let their military action become much more efficient. As a matter of fact, Ta Dun was not the only chief that was killed by the Cao army. The ruling class of Wuhuan was completely destroyed. It proved the importance of decapitation strike. At the same time, this battle was an example that the traditional tactic of just relying on horsemanship and archery

had become out of date. The combination of horse archer and heavy cavalry was the the right way on East Asian battlefield.

Except the reason of military, the failure of the Yuan family was also political. At the same time, as the officer of the Han Dynasty, Yuan Shao formed an alliance with the nomads just because he wanted to annex the territory of other warlords of the Han Nationality. Yuan's behavior could be seen as betraying his own nationality. What's worse, he also killed an adviser named Tian Feng (?-200) during the battle of Guan Du. Therefore, during the battle of White Wolf Mountain, as the enemy of the Yuan family, Cao Cao could receive assistance from the intellectuals of the Han Nationality. For example, an official named Tian Chou (168-214) helped Cao find a route to make a surprise attack on the Wuhuan cavalry during the battle [2].

#### 7.4 The Battle of Changban

**The Process of the Battle of Changban.** In 208, after annexing the territory of the Yuan family, Cao Cao started to attack Jing prefecture (mainly including today's Hubei and Hunan Provinces, China), the territory of Liu Biao (142-208). At that time, Liu Biao just died because of disease. His son named Liu Cong (?-?) chose to surrender to the Cao army. Led by Liu Bei (161-223), the civilians and the soldiers who did not want to surrender started to go into exile. After hearing the news, Cao started to pursue with five thousand cavalymen. In Changban (located in today's Yichang, Hubei Province, China), two armies started a fierce battle. Though Liu Bei and his generals finally escaped successfully, two of his daughter were captured by the cavalry of Cao Chun [2].

**The Analysis of the Battle of Changban.** As a matter of fact, when talking about this battle, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was usually ignored because the gallant deed of the Liu army's two generals was too famous. Even in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the deeds of Zhang Fei (?-221) and Zhao Yun (?-229) were also fascinating. However, as their enemies, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry also showed their high military qualities. They not only started to fight after one-day forced march but also found the command center of the Liu army as soon as possible. From the combat mission of this battle, Leopard Cavalry might act as the main force of the Cao army. Because it was a battle between elite soldiers and refugees, the combat effectiveness of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry could not be fully displayed.

#### 7.5 The Battle of Weinan

**The Insurgency of Ma Chao and Han Sui.** In 208, Cao Cao was defeated in the battle of Chibi by Sun Quan (182-252) and Liu Bei [2]. After that, he also experienced a series of failed military actions. These failures symbolized the end of the Cao army's enlargement southward. After noticing it, Cao had to start enlargement westward, a new military action. Therefore, Guanzhong area (located in today's Shaanxi Province, China) and Bashu area (located in today's Sichuan Province, China) became his new

aims. Compared with the army of Guanzhong area, the army of Bashu area was relatively weak. Therefore, it firstly became the aim of Cao Cao. However, the warlords of Guanzhong area doubted that the Cao army wanted to attack them. In order to protect themselves, they made an alliance led by two warlords named Ma Chao (176-222) and Han Sui (?-215). This event was called the insurgency of Ma Chao and Han Sui (211).

**The Army of Guanzhong Area.** There were totally ten warlords who joined in the rebel army. Their names were Ma Chao, Han Sui, Hou Xuan (?-?), Cheng Yin (?-?), Yang Qiu (?-?), Li Kan (?-211), Zhang Heng (?-?), Liang Xing (?-211), Cheng Yi (?-211) and Ma Wan (?-?) [24]. As a matter of fact, these warlords just made an alliance when the war started. In history, these warlords were called the ten generals of Guanzhong. They quickly assemble an army consisted of one hundred thousand soldiers (including the Han people, the Qiang people and the nomads) [24]. This army stationed in Tongguan (located in today's Weinan, Shaanxi Province, China).

This army had a much more famous name Xiliang Tiejì (the cavalry of Liang prefecture). However, according to history records, this army included cavalry and infantry. In August 211, the Cao army was attacked by Ma Chao's cavalry and infantry when crossing the river [24]. However, many people thought that Ma's army just consisted of cavalrymen. This misunderstanding mainly came from the novels about that period. Though the cavalry of that area was of high-profile, it was still an army of the Han Dynasty's style. Therefore, infantry was also an important part.

The soldiers of Guanzhong were of notable feature. They were good at using spear [2] [24]. In fact, the Guanzhong army not only included the soldiers of the Han Nationality. Some people from the Qiang Nationality (a minority nationality living in western China) and other nomadic troops also served in this army. It was a kind of military system of Eastern Han Dynasty. The government would arranged some officers of the Han Nationality to lead the soldiers from minority nationalities. This phenomenon usually appeared in the border guards of Eastern Han Dynasty. In late Eastern Han Dynasty, following their Han commanders, these barbarian soldiers also participated in the civil war of the Central Plains.

**The Process of the Battle of Weinan.** The march of the Cao army started in July 211 [2]. After coming to September, crossing the Puban River (located in today's Weinan, Shaanxi Province, China) became the first challenge that the Cao army needed to face. The cavalry of Ma Chao kept attacking the Cao army when they were crossing the river [2]. Because of Xu Zhu's (?-?) cover, Cao crossed the river successfully [24]. After crossing the river successfully, Cao built a fortress as soon as possible. Under the cover of the fortress, the whole Cao army crossed the river [2].

The decisive battle between Cao and Ma also happened in the same month. At the very beginning, the light troops of the Cao army were arranged in the front line. After fighting for a long time, Tiger Cavalry started to attack from the back of the Guanxi army [2] [24]. A few generals of the Guanxi army such as Cheng Yi and Li Kan were killed. The charge of Tiger Cavalry successfully broke through the line of the Guanxi army. Ma Chao and Han Sui had to retreat to Liang Prefecture [2]. A month later, Yang



Qiu, a general of the Guanxi army chose to surrender. In December, the insurgency finally came to an end.

This battle was the last glory of this army. As an old saying goes, war is nothing but the continuation of politics [25]. After coming to the Three Kingdoms period, the generals from the Cao family were not trusted by the emperors of the Wei Kingdom. Therefore, such an army whose commanders were from the Cao family had no chance to exist.

**The Analysis of the Battle of Weinan.** For Tiger and Leopard Cavalry, this battle was the last time that it was directly led by Cao Cao. In this battle, this army performed as well as before. More importantly, the soldiers of Guanxi area were seen as one of the best ones of late Eastern Han Dynasty. Therefore, defeating them proved the combat effectiveness of Tiger Cavalry. As a matter of fact, the tactic of the Cao army was really simple which could be seen in the whole Chinese history. However, in the whole age of cold weapon, this tactic was irreplaceable.

## 8 CONCLUSION

Tiger and Leopard Cavalry was one of the most important armies during late Eastern Han Dynasty. In view of property, it could be seen as the private army of the Cao family. Led by the people of this family, Tiger and Leopard Cavalry participated in many important battles, contributing to the business of the reunifying of Northern China. More importantly, the destroying of Wuhuan let a huge threat of the Han Nationality come to an end. From this angle, the officers and soldiers of Tiger and Leopard Cavalry made great contributions to their own nation. However, because of the attribute of private army, the combat effectiveness Tiger and Leopard mostly relied on the military ability of the people from the Cao family. Therefore, this army started to fade after a short time. It was an important enlightenment of military construction.

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